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ARGOSY

MAY, 1954
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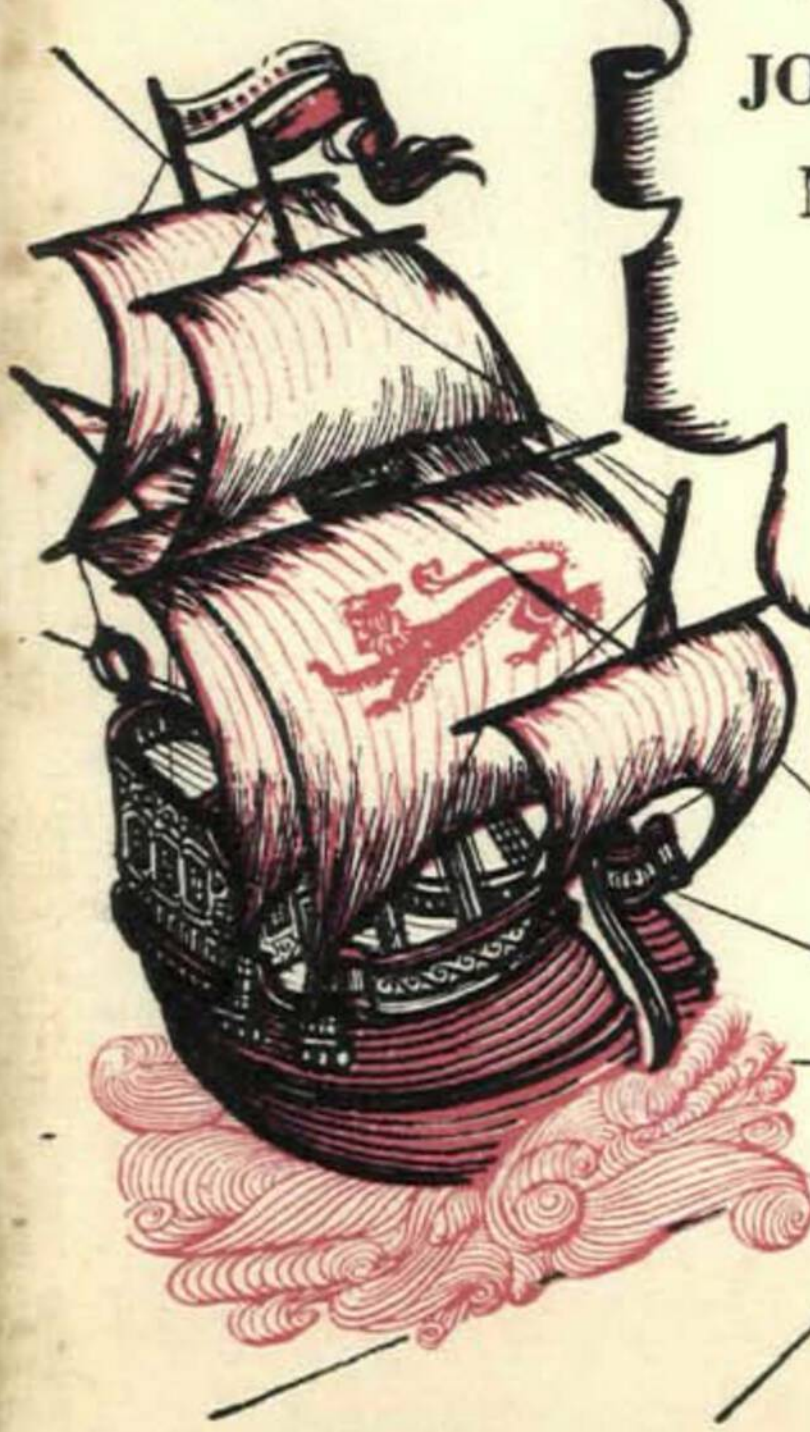

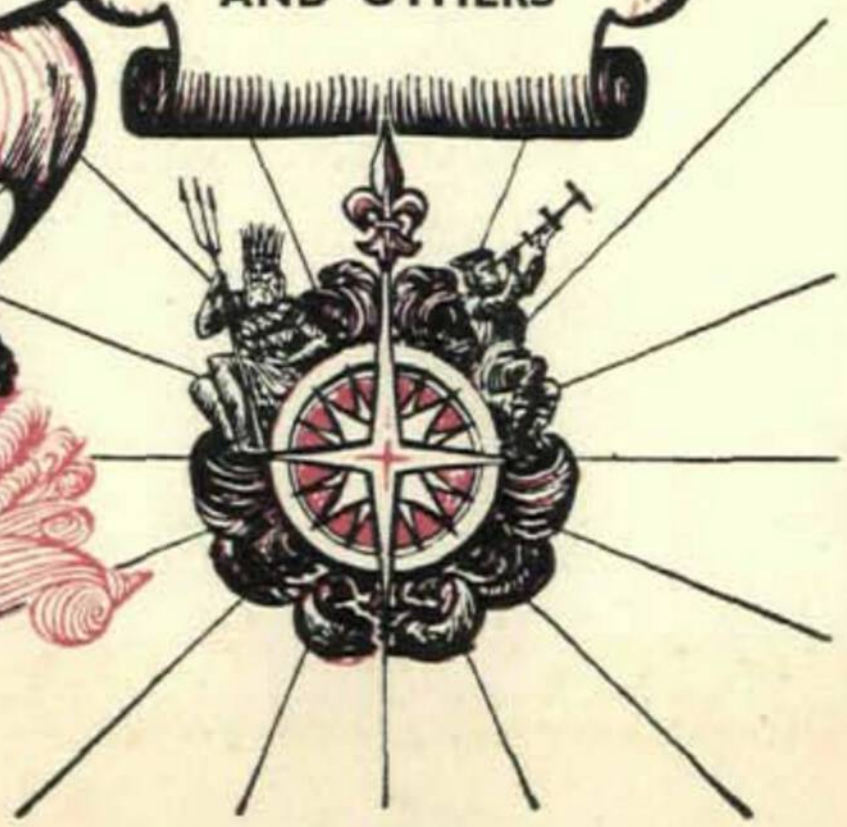

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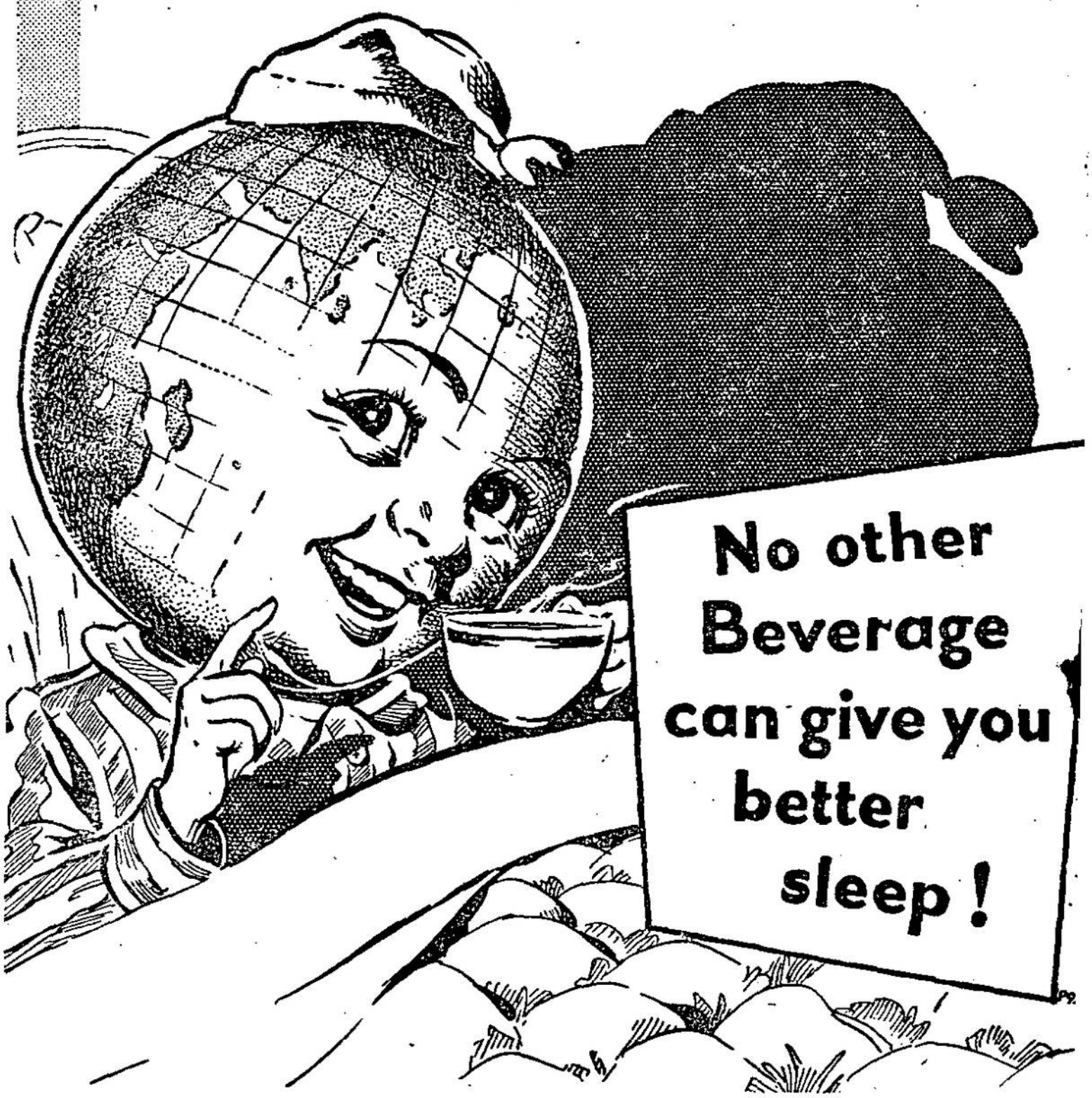

ARGOSY

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Springtime

MAY came in warm and splendid, and the buds and blades, the opening petals and the blown petals, the wafts of sweet air and the storms of warm rain drove on over the country as in every other year. The blackbirds kept up their charm the day long, and the cuckoos were at it from four or five in the morning.

Out went the coots and their young across the mere, the dippers made their well-roofed house, the wag-tails played beside the water, and the heron stood watching his long shadow in the glassy lake, as if he wondered how soon it would be as long as the steeple. The lily leaves lay green and bright, like empty boats, for the time of lilies was not yet. The young leaves on the forest trees lengthened and broadened, the grass grew long and began to ripple, the corn sprang quick and bright. The Lent lilies in the meadow wilted, and the bluebells came, like smoke bellying up the slopes of the woods.

All was made anew . . . the thorn trees along by the mere were so thick-set with blossom that they laid a solid wall of white in the water at their feet. Though it was noon, the charm of bird-song was nearly as loud as it was at dawn, for in May they never seem to weary . . . The kitchen was pleasant after the heat outside, for it was an early year. The sun lay in quiet patches along the quarries, and the lilac outside, just past its prime, and the sweeter for it, sent a strong freshness through the open window.

MARY WEBB, *Precious Bane*

TRAITORS

We heard that taunting laugh away among the trees

by DORIS LESSING

WE had discovered the Thompsons' old house long before their first visit.

At the back of our house the ground sloped up to where the bush began, an acre of trailing pumpkin vines, ash-heaps where papaw trees sprouted, and lines draped with washing where the wind slapped and jiggled. The bush was dense and frightening, and the grass there higher than a tall man. There were not even paths.

When we had tired of our familiar acre we explored the rest of the farm: but that particular stretch of bush was avoided. Sometimes we stood at its edge, and peered in at the tangled granite outcrops and great ant-heaps curtained with Christmas fern. Sometimes we pushed our way in a few feet, till the grass closed behind us, leaving overhead a small space of blue. Then we lost our heads and ran back again.

Later, when we were given our first rifle and a new sense of bravery, we realized we had to challenge that bush. For several days we hesitated, listening to the guinea-fowl calling only a hundred yards away, and making excuses for cowardice. Then, one morning, at sunrise, when the trees were pink and gold, and the grass-stems were running bright drops of dew, we looked at each other, smiling weakly, and slipped into the bushes with our hearts beating.

At once we were alone, closed in by grass, and we had to reach out for the other's dress and cling together. Slowly, heads down, eyes half closed against the sharp grass-seeds, two small girls pushed their way past ant-heap and outcrop, past thorn and gully and thick clumps of cactus where any wild animal might lurk.

Suddenly, after only five minutes of terror, we emerged in a space where the red earth was scored with cattle tracks. The guinea-fowl were clinking ahead of us in the grass, and we caught a glimpse of a shapely dark bird speeding along a path. We followed, shouting with joy because the forbidding patch of bush was as easily conquered and made our own as the rest of the farm.

We were stopped again where the ground dropped suddenly to the vlei, a twenty-foot shelf of flattened grass where the cattle went to water. Sitting, we lifted our dresses and coasted downhill on the slippery swathes, landing with torn knickers and scratched knees in a donga of red dust scattered with dried cowpats and bits of glistening quartz. The guinea-fowl stood in a file and watched us, their heads tilted with apprehension; but my sister said, with bravado: "I am going to shoot a buck!"

She waved her arms at the birds and they scuttled off. We looked at each other and laughed, feeling too grown-up for guinea-fowl now.

Here, down on the verges of the vlei, it was a different kind of bush. The grass was thinned by cattle, and red dust spurted as we walked. There were sparse thorn trees, and everywhere the poison-apple bush, covered with small fruit like yellow plums. Patches of wild marigold filled the air with a rank, hot smell.

Moving with exaggerated care, our bodies tensed, our eyes fixed half a mile off, we did not notice that a duiker stood watching us ten paces away. We yelled with excitement and the buck vanished. Then we ran like maniacs, screaming at the tops of our voices, while the bushes whipped our faces and the thorns tore our legs.

Ten minutes later we came slap up against a barbed fence. "The boundary," we whispered, awed. This was a legend; we had imagined it as a sort of Wall of China, for beyond were thousands and thousands of miles of unused Government land where there were leopards and baboons and herds of koodoo. But we were disappointed: even the famous boundary was only a bit of wire after all, and the duiker was nowhere in sight.

Whistling casually to show we didn't care, we marched along by the wire, twanging it so that it reverberated half a mile away down in the vlei. Around us the bush was strange; this part of the farm was quite new to us. There was still nothing but thorn trees and grass; and fat wood-pigeons cooed from every branch. We swung on the fence stanchions and wished that Father would suddenly appear and take us home to breakfast. We were hopelessly lost.

It was then that I saw the papaw tree. I must have been staring at it for some minutes before it grew in on my sight; for it was such an odd place for a papaw tree to be. On it were three heavy yellow papaws.

"There's our breakfast," I said.

We shook them down, sat on the ground, and ate. The insipid, creamy flesh soon filled us, and we lay down, staring at the sky, half asleep. The sun blared down; we were melted through with

heat and tiredness. But it was very hard. Turning over, staring, we saw worn bricks set into the ground. All round us were stretches of brick, stretches of cement.

"The old Thompson house," we whispered.

And all at once the pigeons seemed to grow still and the bush became hostile. We sat up, frightened. How was it we hadn't noticed it before? There was a double file of papaws among the thorns; a purple bougainvillaea tumbled over the bushes; a rose tree scattered white petals at our feet; and our shoes were scrunching in broken glass.

It was desolate, lonely, despairing; and we remembered the way our parents had talked about Mr. Thompson who had lived here for years before he married. Their hushed, disapproving voices seemed to echo out of the trees; and in a violent panic we picked up the gun and fled back in the direction of the house. We had imagined we were lost; but we were back in the gully in no time, climbed up it, half sobbing with breathlessness, and fled through that barrier of bush so fast we hardly noticed it was there.

It was not even breakfast-time.

"We found the Thompsons' old house," we said at last, feeling hurt that no one had noticed from our proud faces that we had found a whole new world that morning.

"Did you?" said Father absently. "Can't be much left of it now."

Our fear vanished. We hardly dared look at each other for shame. And later that day we went back and counted the papaws and trailed the bougainvillaea over a tree and staked the white rosebush.

In a week we had made the place entirely our own. We were there all day, sweeping the debris from the floor and carrying away loose bricks into the bush. We were not surprised to find dozens of empty bottles scattered in the grass. We washed them in a pot-hole in the vlei, dried them in the wind, and marked out the rooms of the house with them, making walls of shining bottles. In our imagination the Thompson house was built again, a small brick-walled place with a thatched roof.

We sat under a blazing sun, and said in our Mother's voice: "It is always cool under thatch, no matter how hot it is outside." And then, when the walls and the roof had grown into our minds and we took them for granted, we played other games, taking it in turn to be Mr. Thompson.

Whoever was Mr. Thompson had to stagger in from the bush, with a bottle in her hand, tripping over the lintel and falling on the floor. There she lay and groaned, while the other fanned her

and put handkerchiefs soaked in vlei water on her head. Or she reeled about among the bottles, shouting abusive gibberish at an invisible audience of natives. We were not brought up in a farming district for nothing.

It was while we were engaged thus, one day, that a native woman came out of the thorn trees and stood watching us. We waited for her to go, drawing together; but she came close and stared in a way that made us afraid. She was old and fat, and she wore a red print dress from the store. She said in a soft, wheedling voice: "When is Boss Thompson coming back?"

"Go away!" we shouted. And then she began to laugh. She sauntered off into the bush, swinging her hips and looking back over her shoulder and laughing. We heard that taunting laugh away among the trees; and that was the second time we ran away from the ruined house, though we made ourselves walk slowly and with dignity until we knew she could no longer see us.

For a few days we didn't go back to the house. When we did, we stopped playing Mr. Thompson. We no longer knew him: that laugh, that slow, insulting stare had meant something outside our knowledge and experience. The house was not ours now. It was some broken bricks on the ground marked out with bottles. We couldn't pretend to ourselves we were not afraid of the place; and we continually glanced over our shoulders to see if the old native woman was standing silently there, watching us.

Idling along the fence, we threw stones at the papaws fifteen feet over our heads till they squashed at our feet. Then we kicked them into the bush.

"Why have you stopped going to the old house?" asked Mother cautiously, thinking that we didn't know how pleased she was. She had instinctively disliked our being there so much.

"Oh, I dunno . . ."

A few days later we heard that the Thompsons were coming to see us; and we knew, without anyone saying anything, that this was no ordinary visit. It was the first time; they wouldn't be coming after all these years without some reason. Besides, our parents didn't like them coming. They were at odds with each other over it.

Mr. Thompson had lived on our farm for ten years before we had it, when there was no one else near for miles and miles. Then, suddenly, he went home to England and brought a wife back with him. The wife never came to this farm. Mr. Thompson left her with friends while he came over to "make the place ready for her." But then the house was burnt down, and Mr. Thompson sold the farm to us and bought another one. People said,

" Poor girl! Just out from home, too." She was angry about the house burning down, because it meant she had to live with the friends for nearly a year while Mr. Thompson built a new house on his new farm.

The night before they came, Mother said several times in a strange, sorrowful voice, " Poor little thing; poor, poor little thing."

Father said: " Oh, I don't know. After all, be just. He was here alone all those years."

It was no good; she disliked not only Mr. Thompson but Father too, that evening; and we were on her side. She put her arms round us, and looked accusingly at Father. " Women get all the worst of everything," she said.

When Mother started talking like that, which she did sometimes, Father used to light his pipe and go for a walk. But tonight he said angrily: " Look here, it's not my fault these people are coming."

" Who said it was? " she answered.

Next day, when the car came in sight, we vanished into the bush. We felt guilty, not because we were running away, a thing we often did when visitors came we didn't like, but because we had made Mr. Thompson's house our own, and because we were afraid if he saw our faces he would know of our morbid, uneasy curiosity about him. And we knew we were letting Mother down by going.

We climbed into the tree that was our refuge on these occasions, and lay along branches twenty feet from the ground, and played at Mowgli, thinking all the time about the Thompsons.

As usual, we lost all sense of time; and when we eventually returned, thinking the coast must be clear, the car was still there. Curiosity got the better of us.

We slunk onto the verandah, smiling bashfully, while Mother gave us a reproachful look. Then, at last, we lifted our heads and looked at Mrs. Thompson. I don't know how we had imagined her; but we had felt for her a passionate, protective pity.

She was a large, blonde, brilliantly coloured lady with a voice like a go-away bird's. It was a horrible voice. Father, who could not stand loud voices, was holding the arms of his chair, and gazing at her with exasperated dislike. Mother had a polite, vacant smile; and in her voice was a note that meant she was being loyal to something against her personal inclinations. We knew that note well.

As for Mr. Thompson, that villain whom we had hated and feared, he was a shaggy and shambling man, who looked at the

ground while his wife talked, with a small apologetic smile. He was not in the least as we had pictured him. He looked like our old dog. For a moment we were confused; then, in a rush, our allegiance shifted. The profound and dangerous pity, aroused in us earlier than we could remember by the worlds of loneliness inhabited by our parents, which they could not share with each other but each shared with us, settled now on Mr. Thompson. Now we hated Mrs. Thompson. The outward sign of it was that we left Mother's chair and went to Father's.

" Don't fidget, there's good kids," he said.

Mrs. Thompson was asking to be shown the old house. We understood, from the insistent sound of her voice, that she had been talking about nothing else all afternoon; or that, at any rate, if she had, it was only with the intention of getting round to the house as soon as she could. She kept saying, smiling ferociously at Mr. Thompson: " I have heard such *interesting* things about that old place. I really must see for myself where it was that my husband lived before I came out . . ." And she looked at Mother for approval.

But Mother said dubiously: " It will soon be dark. And there is no path."

As for Father, he said bluntly: " There's nothing to be seen. There's nothing left."

" Yes, I heard it had been burnt down," said Mrs. Thompson, with another look at her husband.

" It was a hurricane lamp . . ." he muttered.

" I want to see for myself."

At this point my sister slipped off the arm of my Father's chair, and said, with a bright, false smile at Mrs. Thompson, " We know where it is. We'll take you." She dug me in the ribs and sped off before anyone could speak.

At last they all decided to come. I took them the hardest, longest way I knew. We had made a path of our own long ago, but that would have been too quick. I made Mrs. Thompson climb over rocks, push through grass, bend under bushes. I made her scramble down the gully so that she fell on her knees in the sharp pebbles and the dust. I walked her so fast, finally, in a wide circle through the thorn trees that I could hear her panting behind me. But she wasn't complaining: she wanted to see the place too badly.

When we came to where the house had been it was nearly dark, and the tufts of long grass were shivering in the night breeze, and the papaw trees were silhouetted high and dark against a red sky. Guinea-fowl were clinking softly all around us.

My sister leaned against a tree, breathing hard, trying to look natural. Mrs. Thompson had lost her confidence. She stood quite still, looking about her, and we knew the silence and the desolation had got her, as it got us that first morning.

"But *where* is the house?" she asked at last, unconsciously softening her voice, staring as if she expected to see it rise out of the ground in front of her.

"I told you, it was burnt down. *Now* will you believe me?" said Mr. Thompson.

"I *know* it was burnt down . . . Well, where was it then?" She sounded as if she were going to cry. This was not at all what she had expected.

Mr. Thompson pointed at the bricks on the ground. He did not move. He stood staring over the fence down to the vlei, where the mist was gathering in long white folds. The light faded out of the sky, and it began to get cold. For a while no one spoke.

"What a god-forsaken place for a house," said Mrs. Thompson, very irritably, at last. "Just as well it was burnt down. Do you mean to say you kids play here?"

That was our cue. "We like it," we said dutifully, knowing very well that the two of us standing on the bricks, hand in hand, beside the ghostly rose bush, made a picture that took all the harm out of the place for her. "We play here all day," we lied.

"Odd taste you've got," she said, speaking at us, but meaning Mr. Thompson.

Mr. Thompson did not hear her. He was looking around with a lost, remembering expression. "Ten years," he said at last. "Ten years I was here."

"More fool you," she snapped. And that closed the subject as far as she was concerned.

We began to trail home. Now the two women went in front; then came Father and Mr. Thompson; we followed at the back. As we passed a small donga under a cactus tree, my sister called in a whisper, "Mr. Thompson, Mr. Thompson, look here."

Father and Mr. Thompson came back. "Look," we said, pointing to the hole that was filled to the brim with empty bottles.

"I came quickly by a way of my own and hid them," said my sister proudly, looking at the two men like a conspirator.

Father was very uncomfortable. "I wonder how they got down here?" he said politely at last.

"We found them. They were at the house. We hid them for you," said my sister, dancing with excitement.

Mr. Thompson looked at us sharply and uneasily. "You are an odd pair of kids," he said.

That was all the thanks we got from him; for then we heard Mother calling from ahead: " What are you all doing there? " And at once we went forward.

After the Thompsons had left we hung around Father, waiting for him to say something.

At last, when Mother wasn't there, he scratched his head in an irritable way and said: " What in the world did you do that for? "

We were bitterly hurt. " *She* might have seen them," I said.

" Nothing would make much difference to that lady," he said at last. " Still, I suppose you meant well."

We drifted off; we felt let down.

In the corner of the verandah, in the dark, sat Mother, gazing into the dark bush. On her face was a grim look of disapproval, and distaste and unhappiness. We were included in it, we knew that.

She looked at us crossly and said, " I don't like you wandering over the farm the way you do. Even with a gun."

But she had said that so often, and it wasn't what we were waiting for. At last it came.

" My two little girls," she said, " out in the bush by themselves, with no one to play with . . ."

It wasn't the bush she minded. We flung ourselves on her. Once again we were swung dizzily from one camp to the other. " Poor Mother," we said. " Poor, poor Mother."

That was what she needed. " It's no life for a woman, this," she said, her voice breaking, gathering us close.

But she sounded comforted.

★ *Doris Lessing, author of " The Grass is Singing," is one of South Africa's promising young writers. She spent her childhood on a Southern Rhodesian farm, which gave her the background to " Traitors." Her third novel will be published soon.*

★ ★ ★

CARELESS TALK

If every man were straightforward in his opinions, there would be no conversation. The fun of talk is to find out what a man really thinks, and then contrast it with the enormous lies he has been telling all dinner, and, perhaps, all his life.

BENJAMIN DISRAELI, *Lothair*

ROMANY TRICK

He learnt how a gipsy lover will scheme and plan

by JIM PHELAN

MOST of the world's quarrels are about love or money, and the Romany folk are no exception to that rule. So the Marrilan family, horse-drawn gipsies about forty strong, hated the very bones of Toby Lovell, although they had never set eyes on him.

That particular quarrel was about love and money, both. Because Rachel Marrilan, a dark-eyed ringleted beauty of the roads, had gone off in young Lovell's waggon. The three hundred pounds Rachel had been left by her grandfather had gone likewise. It was fairly certain that Rachel and Toby were married. Furthermore, the money was Rachel's own, to do as she liked with. But arguments of that kind make little difference among the Romany people. As far as the Marrilans were concerned, Toby Lovell had stolen the prettiest girl from their waggons, and had stolen three hundred pounds of the family's money as well. So things would go badly with young Lovell, whenever the Marrilans caught up with him.

Toby had come from the north of England, up near the Scottish border. So he was new on the southern roads, where the Marrilan waggons travelled. But he had met and married Rachel, and had taken her away in his own waggon, without meeting even one of the family and without asking anyone's consent. Of course, that was an added grievance.

Catching up with the young couple would only be a matter of time. Because Toby Lovell's caravan was keeping to the south-country roads, and the young fellow's description was known to every Romany man for miles around. Lean and muscular, with a laughing, brown, clean-shaven face, Toby was handsome and more than that. Wearing an expensive red-and-gold scarf and a black hat with a thin silver chain for a hatband, he was unmistakable, at a horse-market or fair.

So the Marrilans never had any difficulty about knowing where Toby had been. But meeting him face to face was another matter. Because Toby was road-shrewd, and kept well out of their way.

He had need to do just that. For a Romany clan can give any offender a dreadful beating. Clubs and whip-handles, trace-chains and bottles and hobnailed boots are apt to go into that argument. And there were nearly forty of the Marrilans. Toby had need to keep out of the way.

He had managed to do it, too, for over a year. More than once the Marrilans nearly trapped the young pair, in the lanes by some quiet village, or on the roadside after a market. But each time Toby and Rachel had word of where the Marrilan waggons were, and each time they managed to slip away, hurrying in their own waggon on the by-ways by night.

Yet, after each escape, while her man was away on the road again, Rachel would sit by her caravan door, brooding. Blank-eyed and still, with no expression showing on her dark, beautiful face, at such a time she sat and brooded, as the Romany women will—brooding over the day when her husband and her family must meet.

There would be only one end to that meeting. Some oaken cudgel, wielded by one of the Marrilans, would smash the black hat with the silver chain—and the laughing brown face below it. Then Rachel would be dragged back to the Marrilan waggons, and that would be the end.

It had to come, sooner or later, and there was no escape. Toby could not take his wife and his waggon away to the north country, because of some trouble with the police up there. So the young couple must keep to the southern roads, in daily danger from the Marrilans.

Of course, they had friends, and information. Nearly always they knew where the Marrilan caravans were, and could avoid them. Knapper Lee, a young waggon-man who was Toby's special friend, kept him well informed, and there were others besides to pass a word in season.

But some day, somewhere, the meeting would come. So Rachel brooded, whenever she was alone.

Things went that way until well into the second summer, with never a chance for the young couple to relax, but always with danger avoided, however narrowly. Then it came about that there would be two big markets in about five weeks' time, at Colebury and Braildon, forty miles apart.

Now, Toby Lovell did a little horse-dealing, and so did the Marrilans. For a horse-dealer, there was little to choose between the two markets, and Toby could make money at either. The question was—for which market would the Marrilan waggons be headed?

If the Marrilan caravans went on towards Colebury, then Toby and Rachel could make for Braildon, in safety. So the young people waited, with their caravan drawn in at a leafy woodland lane, to see what would Rachel's family do.

It was a secluded spot, with only one other caravan near, the waggon of Knapper Lee. Knapper was just such another as Toby, tall and clean-shaven and good-looking, and he had no great love for the Marrilan clan. So he was more than useful in helping Toby to keep track of the hostile family.

Toby was away on the road a good deal during the five weeks, and that left time on Rachel's hands, to worry and scheme. Which she did.

She worried because she was a Marrilan herself, knowing all the tricks and stratagems her family might use, to even their score with Toby. Trying to work out what plan they might make next, between the markets of Colebury and Braildon, she sat and brooded each day.

And each day Knapper Lee watched her, admiringly, from the door of his own caravan.

In the ordinary way, Knapper would never have been such a fool as to make love to Toby Lovell's girl. But—five weeks is a long time, and it was a pleasant secluded place, and Toby was often away on the road. So presently Knapper was urging Rachel to leave the south country altogether, and to go away in Knapper's waggon to the north, leaving all the trouble and danger and annoyance behind her.

Every bit as handsome as Toby was Knapper, with the same laughing ways and the same quick, ready speech. Long before the five weeks had passed, he had Rachel undecided, with other things to brood over now—choosing between the two men, and between the north country and the south.

But she made no sign to Toby, and she gave no answer to Knapper, until the night before Colebury market. Then Toby came in, hotfoot off the road after three days' absence, with word that the Marrilan waggons were heading Colebury way. So it would be Braildon for Rachel—and for whichever of the two men she chose to take with her.

In the early morning of Braildon market-day, a big motor-waggon moved slowly on one of the lanes leading into the village. A long, covered furniture-van, nearly touching the bushes on either side, it looked out of place in the lonely, narrow lane, but the driver seemed to know his way.

He pulled up, and descended, to look back up the road. Coming down the hill was a gipsy caravan, and the driver of the

motor-waggon nodded in satisfaction, as he watched the couple who walked by the horse's head. They came on slowly, and were both of them alert and watchful, for the most part. Now and then the man relaxed, to tilt his black hat on the back of his head, and laugh while he spoke to the girl. But each time his attention went sharply back to the road.

Nothing moved in the lane, except the horse and caravan and the pair who walked beside it.

The driver of the motor-waggon watched them, and a small hiss came through his teeth, as the other man fingered his flaming red-and-gold scarf and made some laughing remark to the girl. But there was no other sign or sound.

Then the caravan had drawn nearly level with the motor-waggon, and the man at the horse's head commenced a laughing protest to the motor-driver. At that moment the doors of the big furniture-waggon swung open, and ten of the Marrilans jumped out on the road.

There was no escape. Like a pack of terriers closing on a pair of rabbits, the Marrilans swept in on the caravan couple. The very first cudgel-blow, from Rachel's father, crushed the hated black hat with the silver chain. Two other cudgels struck the hat's owner even before he had reached the ground.

It was all over in thirty seconds. No one struck Rachel, but her man lay senseless and bleeding by the roadside, and the Marrilans laughed over him, the hard bitter laughter of the road.

Slowly, without a word or a sob, Rachel turned away towards the caravan door. At once her father's lean brown hand gripped her shoulder, and the old man jerked a thumb towards the furniture-waggon.

"In there," he ordered. "Jump in, and be sharp about it."

The girl stood still.

"I want—" she said dully, in a toneless voice, "I want to take my money with me." Then her father bellowed with laughter, and the others joined in.

"A true Marrilan, after all," grinned the old man, and released the girl's shoulder. "Get it," he ordered, "and sharp."

In less than a minute Rachel was back from the caravan, and two of her brothers lifted her into the furniture-waggon. Then the rest of the family piled in, and they drove away, leaving a bloodstained, unconscious man on the roadside, by a neglected horse-caravan.

That night, in their camp forty miles away by Colebury, the Marrilans laughed, and drank and laughed again, as they told and retold the details of the swift revenge.

They could even laugh next morning, and were still unperturbed, when it was known that Rachel had again disappeared. She had taken the three hundred pounds with her, too. But that was only to be expected, and was the ordinary caution of the road. So none of the Marrilans worried. Rachel would come back, all right. For where would she have gone otherwise? Not with cheeky young Lovell again—since Braildon Hospital would be *his* address for the next three months or longer. The hard laughter of the roads came up again at that point, as the Marrilans gossiped about the end of the feud.

There was no need to worry, they decided at the end. Rachel would come back.

But Rachel was thirty miles away, where a dusty caravan stood in a lonely lane, half hidden among the bushes. By the roadside a weary horse grazed, and in the bracken Rachel and her other man lay side by side, to kiss while they talked of the ambush.

Presently the girl sat up, with the old worried, brooding look back on her face for a moment. "The horse has rested enough, my dark one," she urged. "Now let us push on, to the west country. It will be strange but, at least, there will be no more danger. *Has* he rested enough?"

Her man only kissed her, and laughed as he stroked the dark ringleted hair. "Tell it," he pressed. "Tell the way of the play, my darkling." And after a moment Rachel told.

It had been a real Marrilan trick, to send their caravans by Colebury, while they themselves hid in ambush on the lane at Braildon. But Rachel, because she was a Marrilan too, had guessed what might happen. Now she lay back in the bracken, and laughed for the first time in weeks, as she told the rest. Her man kissed her again, and held her close, but there was wonderment in his eyes as he heard how a woman in love will plan and scheme.

"Twelve months I waited for that ambush," said Rachel, "And glad I was—glad that I had everything ready—when I saw that big waggon in the lane."

She had seen the furniture-waggon on the road ahead, and had known for a certainty that the Marrilans were inside, waiting for the man with the caravan. There they had waited, while he strode towards them, laughing and pleased with himself and all unsuspecting.

Rachel fell silent at that stage, and her face went dark for a moment. But presently the hard grim humour of the road was back in her voice and her eyes.

That was when she told how the false friend had laughed,

exulting because he had stolen Toby's girl, and his money, and everything he valued—even the red-and-gold scarf and the hat with the thin silver chain.

★ ★ ★

FINAL THOUGHTS ON THE WEATHER IN ENGLAND DURING 1953

The bright earth moves in destined grooves:
The speed of light remains the same,
The full moon's rise is no surprise—
All is predictable and tame.
When Isaac Newt. was bumped by fruit,
The speed at which his apple sped
Was neither less nor more, I guess,
Than that which bumps a modern head.
No physicist has ever missed
The permanence of nature's laws;
Astronomers will all aver
That wandering planets never pause;
The doctors know—they'll tell you so—
That measles always has a rash,
That if you fall from something tall
There's bound to be a nasty smash.
It takes no skill to know that ill
Will come from drinking gin in quarts
Or if you take ground glass in cake
You'll soon be feeling out of sorts.
There is no flaw in Mendel's law,
And Euclid's propositions yet
Refer to truths that modern youths
Are not permitted to forget.
Wise men and fools are bound by rules;
The universe is standardized;
The universe's primal curse
Is that it cannot be surprised.
Its laws are strict, we can predict
What x will do when faced by y;
It's got a norm, it's uniform,
It doesn't change and doesn't try.
There's only one way it can act—
And that's a sci-en-tif-ic fact!

Yet here in England, months together,
Nobody can predict the weather.

DAVID DAICHES

BIG GAME

An icy feeling of horror started at my heart

by ALISTAIR MacCRAE

IF I had known who was waiting for me in my chambers that afternoon I might not have returned to them so confidently, and certainly not so cheerfully.

Gregory Clench hadn't changed in the six years since I last saw that white face under the cluster-lights in the smoking-room of the Old Safari Club. Or . . . had he?

Physically he was the same, lean as a gnawed bone, his body and face a grim collaboration of natural economies. Together they combined to make his eyes and ears too large and noticeable for polite comfort. What his brain was doing in that narrow cell of a head it inhabited was, and always had been, any man's guess. Obscurity was Gregory Clench's stock-in-trade.

A thin ray of early spring sunshine pointed him out to me as I came in. He sat as narrow and straight as an Eastern mystic on my best easy chair, with his fingers steepled together and his thin lips drawn slightly away from his teeth in a smile as generous as a razor-slash.

I remembered he had worn the same smile when I had informed him of the Club Committee's decision to ask for his resignation. As Secretary, it had fallen to my lot to perform that unpleasant duty, and I had executed it with what tact and gentleness I could muster. After I had blundered on for three or four minutes, trying to explain the foundation rule that barred professional big-game hunters from membership, his face had dropped its smile as a boat slips an anchor, and sailed out free into the grey ocean of his hatred.

"Is this a Club decision, or another divine command from the almighty Buljover?" he asked, through white drawn lips.

I got a bit hot under the collar at that remark. Colonel Buljover had certainly supplied the necessary information and moved the motion demanding Clench's resignation, but the final decision was the unanimous verdict of the whole Club membership. That there was bad blood between Gregory Clench and Colonel Buljover had been no secret in the Club, but I don't think anyone had expected the Colonel to go to the length of

setting up a private investigation into Clench's past history, with a view to having him removed. Certainly, he suffered quite a lot from the sneering lips of his adversary who never missed an opportunity of contradicting him, if he made the slightest mistake when indulging in his favourite hobby of relating exploits from his experience of big-game hunting.

And the fact that Gregory Clench was always technically right in his arguments did not help to soothe the Colonel's ruffled feelings. His healthy rubicund features would become turkey-red as he detected a note of derisive scorn in the other man's voice.

I may as well add here that while the Club members as individuals regretted the means by which Gregory Clench's end at the Old Safari had been accomplished, there was not one who did not welcome the end itself with a sigh of relief. Clench's personality was not the kind that leads to popularity—a fact that never seemed to have disturbed him in the slightest until the day on which I asked for his resignation.

After I had informed him that the decision was the unanimous one of the whole Club membership, he stood very still, not looking at me, but beyond me to a glass-fronted case on the far wall of the room. The case contained the head of a particularly ferocious-looking gorilla, which had been Gregory Clench's contribution to the collection of hunting relics that adorned the room. Suddenly he nodded to the gorilla's head as though to an old friend, and without another glance in my direction, turned abruptly on his heel and left the room, and the building.

From that day until the morning on which he presented himself at my chambers, neither I nor any member of the Club had set eyes on him. And I deeply regretted that I had to be the first to do so.

The silence in my room having grown inordinately long and uncomfortable, I was compelled for civility's sake to break it, and I tried to be as hearty as I could in the circumstances.

"Well, well," I cried with a joviality I was far from feeling. "It's a deuce of a long time since I clapped eyes on you, Clench. Have a cigar."

I pushed the box over the table to him, and he gave it one long look before returning his gaze to my face. His eyes met mine, and I remembered one of the Club members once saying that the man reminded him of a green mamba, the way he looked at you. That description aptly fitted the cold and merciless calculation of his eyes. And when he spoke his voice matched them.

"So much of a stranger that you have forgotten I don't use

these things." He nodded contemptuously towards my box of cigars. "Only *amateur* hunters can afford to contaminate their natural senses with smouldering garbage."

As always, the man's insolence infuriated me, and at the same time left me helpless, unable to find a crushing enough retort, so it was left to him to break the silence again.

"If you want to know, I've been abroad," he said. "I've just come from the boat." His eyes dropped to an ancient leather hat-box in which he carried his topi. "The rest of my luggage is being sent on to my hotel, but I always prefer to have this one with me."

I made a mental note that his eccentricity was one which was shared by a great many smugglers and customs evaders, but I kept that thought to myself and merely asked him, in my most sarcastic vein, to what I owed the honour of his company. It did not surprise me that my sarcasm failed to make any impression on him, but his answer to my question was so totally unexpected that it quite knocked me speechless.

"I want to have dinner with you at the Club this evening," he said, and sat there giving me the green-mamba look all over again.

The request hit me between the eyes like a blow from a sandbag, so that for a moment all I could do was sit staring at him with my mouth hanging open. That, unfortunately, gave him the opportunity to carry his campaign a little farther into my territory. "I'll pay for what I eat and drink, of course," he said, a remark so offensive that it sent the hot blood rising to my forehead. "Have you any objections?"

It amazed me to discover that now I was frantically trying to think up some excuse to avoid the issue of having either to take him to the Club or give him a point-blank refusal. He knew, of course, that I was a bachelor and practically lived in the Club premises, but I might have a dozen reasons for dining elsewhere that evening.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I was meeting a client in the City, when he said the thing that sealed it for ever as far as I was concerned.

"You're not afraid to take me into your precious Club, are you?" he asked, and like a fool I fell for it.

"Of course not," I replied coldly. "I can see you still have a genius for absurd notions, Clench. If it suits you I'll meet you outside the building at . . . say, a quarter past seven?"

"Good enough," he said. "To tell you the truth, I'm curious to have another look at the place before the mildew swallows it entirely."

I ignored the gibe, and when he had left my office I walked about, fanning the place with a newspaper, until it struck me just how ridiculous I would look to anyone coming in, so I dropped the newspaper hastily and tried to concentrate on my work. I'm afraid the rest of that day was a dead loss to me, and I was relieved when eventually the time came to leave my chambers and fight my way through London's chaotic streets to my lodging.

The only thing I was really glad about was that Colonel Buljover was abroad at the time, somewhere in Africa. He had gone about five months before, and had sent me one short letter from Cape Town, telling me he was going up country on an elephant hunt.

I was still congratulating myself that the fiery old unforgiving soldier was safely out of the way when I arrived at the Club, and found Gregory Clench waiting for me on the top step of the flight that led up from the pavement to the big revolving doors. Apparently he had not been to his hotel in the interval, because he was still in his lounge suit and had the ancient hat-box in his right hand. He greeted me cordially enough, but it was a cordiality that belonged to his lips alone, for his eyes had no share in it; they still maintained their unflinching, cold scrutiny of everything they rested on.

We drew several curious glances from the few members of the club who were there that night, and I fancied I saw the eyes of old Wilberforce the waiter twitch slightly at the sight of my companion. But, of course, nothing was said, as no one would have dreamt of questioning a member's privilege to bring a guest to dinner, no matter what their private opinion of the guest might be.

Strangely enough, the meal did not prove to be half the ordeal I had thought it would. Gregory Clench, who seemed to be quite at his ease, steered the conversation round to tiger hunting, a subject on which he was certainly an authority. It was only when he was talking of such things that his face showed the slightest traces of animation, but even then one could detect the snake-look in his cold eyes, brilliant but utterly lacking in any human feeling. But I became so engrossed in listening to his account of a duel with a wounded tiger that I forgot his face, his eyes, and his character, and I don't really know whether I was glad or sorry that Wilberforce remembered my instructions to come and tell me I was wanted on the telephone.

I rose and my guest rose with me. "I'll be in the smoking-room when you're through," he said, and without giving me time to reply, he lifted the hat-box, which he still kept with him, and walked out of the dining-room.

On my way back from my imaginary telephone conversation I decided that I really did want to escape from my unwelcome guest, and managed to concoct a neat and plausible story about a client who wished to see me urgently. As it turned out, however, my story was not necessary, after all, because as I entered the smoking-room I met Gregory Clench coming out.

"Sorry, I've got to go," he said. "I've just remembered I had to see a Press reporter at my hotel this evening. If I hurry I may be able to catch him. Good-bye, and thanks for displaying so much of the old-school spirit to an untouchable."

He had gone before I had time to think up a suitable retort, and as I heard the revolving doors whispering behind him, I gave a sigh of relief and turned into the smoking-room. The lights were off, and I reflected that the one thing Gregory Clench and I had in common was a love of sitting in the fire-light.

Glad that my ordeal was over and that I could spend the rest of the evening quietly in the Club, I dropped into an easy chair by the fire, and began to feel at peace with the whole world. I must have dozed off because I was wakened by the lights being switched on, and turned in my chair to see old Wilberforce coming in with a scuttle of coal. He made up the fire, and I asked him to bring me a whisky and soda.

It was while I was waiting for him to come back with my drink that I looked across the big room, and an icy feeling of horror started at my heart and spread itself in rivers through all the veins in my body. I was looking directly at the glass-fronted case in which was kept the gorilla's head presented to the Club by Gregory Clench.

But the head that now glared at me from the frame of glass was not the head of a gorilla. It was the head of Colonel Buljover, crudely mummified but undeniably recognizable.

As I thought of Gregory Clench travelling over the world with his thin face, his stone-cold eyes, and the ancient leather hat-box in his hand, my stomach turned over and I was lying in the first faint of my life when Wilberforce came in with my whisky and soda. I didn't need any soda.

★ ★ ★

CONJUGAL RIGHTS

The perfect hostess will see to it that the works of male and female authors are segregated on her bookshelves. Their proximity, unless they are married, should not be tolerated.

LADY GOUGH, *in a book of etiquette*, 1863

SONG OF THE VELD

I speak of Africa and golden joys
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *King Henry IV*

There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it. The road climbs seven miles into them, to Carisbrooke; and from there, if there is no mist, you look down on one of the fairest valleys of Africa. About you there is grass and bracken and you may hear the forlorn crying of the titihoya, one of the birds of the veld. Below you is the valley of the Umzimkulu, on its journey from the Drakensberg to the sea; and beyond and behind the river, great hill after great hill; and beyond and behind them, the mountains of Ingeli and East Griqualand.

ALAN PATON, *Cry, the Beloved Country*

The Zebras

From the dark woods that breathe of fallen showers,
Harnessed with level rays in golden reins,
The zebras draw the dawn across the plains
Wading knee-deep among the scarlet flowers.
The sunlight, zithering their flanks with fire,
Flashes between the shadows as they pass
Barred with electric tremors through the grass
Like wind along the gold strings of a lyre.

Into the flushed air snorting rosy plumes
That smoulder round their feet in drifting fumes,
With dove-like voices call the distant fillies,
While round the herds the stallion wheels his flight,
Engine of beauty volted with delight,
To roll his mare among the trampled lilies.

ROY CAMPBELL

Early Pretoria

The town itself, which he had never seen before, appeared half asleep in its deep-sunken, watery hollow, with the protective foot-hills of the Magaliesberg rising behind it. Yet, for all its apparent drowsiness, the capital had more pretensions to grace and dignity than the high-veld dorps which he knew. One entered it through a long avenue of magnificent blue-gums which gave the approach a ceremonial air. Though the one-storeyed

houses of unburnt brick were no larger than those of Potchefstroom or Paardekraal, they were surrounded by ample gardens and orchards of flowers and sub-tropical fruit which gave them an air of ease and opulence, each set in its matrix of living green. As he advanced towards the church square over a waggon-track that meandered through the wide, grassy street beside a rippling water-course, Janse became aware of the pervasive fragrance of roses.

FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG, *The City of Gold*

Autumn Colour

The cassias, whose yellowed elegance
Lit the grey road, have turned once more to green,
And here the subtle Autumn makes her entrance.

A few dead leaves upon the trees, half seen;
Sway in high winds; the dust swirls endlessly
Into the ditches where the rains had been;

And the bright ranks of zinnias barrenly
Shatter their heads, each frizzled to brown fez,
On the hard ground in broken heraldry.

It is the time of red and feathered grasses,
And though the maize is withered now and dead,
And dry twigs crack beneath each foot that passes,

The cool air curls the clear sky overhead
Into a gay kaleidoscope of glass
As though earth's brilliance were up there instead . . .

JOHN BAYLISS, *In Africa*

Zulu Dance

Then a third team of magnificently garbed Zulus came in, a barbaric and splendid sight. They wore girdles of leopard skin. White sheepskin cross-belts lay on their coffee-coloured chests and plumes waved on their heads. They carried shields and spears, and their performance, although I was told it was a marriage dance, looked like the beginning of a war. These were men splendid in physique and bearing. They moved like kings. Their muscles rippled under their brown skins and they provided their own music, a long, shouting chant. The dance went on for the best part of an hour. Sometimes they would all sit down and I thought it was ended, but after a moment they would rise and start all over again.

H. V. MORTON, *In Search of South Africa*

Kaffir-Woman

He put his tools carefully together, ready for tomorrow, and walked slowly out. At the side of the waggon-house there was a world of bright sunshine, and a hen with her chickens was scratching among the gravel. Waldo seated himself near them with his back against the red-brick wall. The long afternoon was half spent, and the kopje was just beginning to cast its shadow over the round-headed yellow flowers that grew between it and the farmhouse. Among the flowers the white butterflies hovered, and on the old kraal mounds three white kids gambolled, and at the door of one of the huts an old grey-headed Kaffir-woman sat on the ground mending her mats. A balmy, restful peacefulness seemed to reign everywhere. Even the old hen seemed well satisfied. She scratched among the stones and called to her chickens when she found a treasure; and all the while tucked to herself with intense inward satisfaction. Waldo, as he sat with his knees drawn up to his chin and his arms folded on them, looked at it all and smiled.

OLIVE SCHREINER, *The Story of an African Farm*

Voortrekkers

Over the silent horizons,
In the unknown,
There was a country that called them,
Lovely and lone.

Distant, unknown lay the country,
Danger between;
They took their waggons and oxen
And sought the unseen.

Farther they travelled and farther;
Paused from their quest.
Still came a voice from the distance:
" Not there is rest."

They are dead and all countries discovered.
Now but in thought
Beckons that fugitive beauty,
Still to be sought.

A country of peace and attainment
Smiles to the sun,
Beckoning, beckoning,
Not to be won.

CHARLES OULD

PEDIGREE PUP

"Ah think its mother had a neet out," said Sam

by T. THOMPSON

SAM INGHAM and Gladys, his wife, first saw the pup in a kind of box-cum-cage outside a household pets' shop, and it looked so much like a pretty snowball that Gladys said, "Eee!" and Sam said, "What's to do?"

"Look at that lovely pup," said Gladys.

"It's more like a mop-rag," said Sam.

"Buy it, Sam," said Gladys. "Ah've allus longed for a pet."

"Well," said Sam, "tha's getten me."

"Ah—but," said Gladys, "Ah mean a proper un."

"If yo're thinkin' o' buyin' that pup," said the shopkeeper, who had just come to see what it was all about, "yo're good judges—that's all Ah con say at present."

"Has it a pedigree?" asked Sam cautiously.

"Well—look at it," said the shopkeeper. "Hasn't it breed written all ower it?"

"There isn't mich on it," said Sam.

"What there is is good," said the shopkeeper. "Th' chap as sowd it me said its gron'feythor wor Simon o' Sheffield."

"If Simon wor owt like my gron'feythor he're nowt to be proud on," said Sam.

"Ah never knew my gron'feythor," said Gladys.

"Tha happen missed nowt," said Sam. "Ah reckon nowt o' ancestry. Deeper tha digs an' more they stink."

"Pups is different," said the shopkeeper. "Breed will tell."

"What breed is it?" asked Sam.

"Happen it's too early to tell," said Gladys. "An' Ah dunnot care what breed it is if it'll tent th' door."

Just then the pup wakened up and tried to sit on its hind legs, but couldn't quite manage it.

"Aw . . . look at it," said Gladys. "Aw . . . buy it, Sam."

"How mich dosta want for it?" asked Sam.

"Seven an' six," said the dealer.

"Lemme look at its pedigree," said Sam.

"It had one," said the dealer, "but it etten it."

"It etten it?" asked Sam incredulously.

" Ay," said the dealer, " it etten it."

" There wor some carlessness somewheer," said Sam, " or else it couldn't ha' etten it."

" Its pedigree wor on the table, an' our little Charley poked it through th' bars," said the dealer, " an' th' pup etten it. Its pedigree's theer all reet."

" But what mun Ah do if anybody wants to see its pedigree? " asked Sam.

" Tell 'em it etten it," said Gladys.

" They'll not believe me," said Sam. " Ah connot reckon to oppen th' pup to show its pedigree."

" Ah'll tell thee what Ah'll do," said the dealer. " Ah'll let thee have it for five shillin', pedigree or no pedigree. That's nobbut mongrel price."

" Ah'll gi' thee five bob," said Sam. " But Ah'd sooner its pedigree wor outside."

" It'll not be a big dog, mesthor? " asked Gladys.

" Them soart never gets big," said the dealer. " Wilta have it i' thi' big pocket? "

" Naw," said Sam. " Ah've getten a brown loaf in mi big pocket."

" Ah'll carry it in mi shoppin' basket," said Gladys.

When they got the pup home they lined a small basket with the remains of a cotton blanket. The pup rolled into the bottom and promptly fell asleep.

" Aw . . . just look at it," said Gladys. " Isn't it bonny? "

" Ah wish it hadn't etten its pedigree," said Sam.

" Give o'er mitherin' about its pedigree," said Gladys impatiently. " As long as it geet here, what's it matter? "

" Tha connot show it bout pedigree," said Sam.

" It's a bonny little thing," said Gladys.

A month after it was still a bonny little thing, but not as little as it was. Two months later its size was disturbing, and at the end of seven months the pup could rest its chin on the table.

" Ah thowt it wor a Pekinese when Ah bowt it," said Sam. " Ah wor mistakken."

" It isn't a Pekinese," agreed Gladys.

" Tha sees what it is to get a pedigree wi' 'em," said Sam. " If Ah'd ha' seen its pedigree when Ah bowt it Ah shouldn't ha' bowt it."

" What breed would tha say it wor? " asked Gladys.

" Tha'rt axin' me summat," said Sam. " There doesn't seem to be mich in th' breed line as is left out. Its ears is Alsatian, its back legs is Airedale. Ah should say its nose is Irish. Its back is

. . . tha could give a lecther on th' damn pup. Tha could show it in ony class."

"Ah wanted one Ah could dad on mi knee," said Gladys.

"Ah'll tak' it back an' see what he says about it," said Sam in sudden indignation. "Ah think he's chetted us. He towd us it wouldn't grow big."

So Sam allowed the giant pup to tug him round to the dealer's. That worthy was smoking a pipe at the door.

"Heigh, thee!" said Sam. "This is that pup as tha sowd us."

"It's thrivin'," said the dealer.

"Thrivin', 'ell!" said Sam crisply. "It shifts more for its dinner nor me an' th' wife put together."

"That shows it's healthy," said the dealer.

"Ah'd like to sell it thee back," said Sam.

"Ah couldn't do that," said the dealer. "Ah only buy pups. Ah haven't room for grown dogs."

"Tha could keep it in th' Drill Hall," said Sam. "Tha said it wouldn't grow big."

"Tha connot allus tell when they're little," said the dealer. "It's surprisin' how they turn out, some on 'em. It's like puttin' a seed in th' ground an' it comes up a marigowd."

"Ay," said Sam. "An' this un's come up a ruddy sunflower."

"Tha connot have it every road," said the dealer. "Ah bet that dog's a rare ratter."

"That's wheer tha'rt wrong," said Sam. "It runs out o'-th' road o' a mouse. It's neither a pet nor a hunter. It wags its tail at tramps an' hawkers. An' if it goes in a puddle it doesn't shake until it gets whoam."

"Tha connot guarantee 'em, tha knows," said the dealer. "It had a pedigree when it come here."

"Ah'd ha' gaen summat to ha' seen it," said Sam. "That theer dog has a bit in it o' all th' twelve lost tribes o' Israel. A pedigree o' that dog'd look like a photygraph o' th' front-line trenches."

"They breed back a bit sometimes," admitted the dealer.

"Well, look at it," said Sam. "It's grown while Ah've been stonnin' here."

"Ah'll tell thee what Ah'm prepared to do," said the dealer. "If Ah con find thee a customer, Ah will. Ah connot say fairer nor that."

"Tha con tell him it'd make a good chain-horse," said Sam. "If we could train it to bat th' carpets wi' its tail it'd be worth summat to us."

"When tha buys a litter o' pups tha con never swear how they'll turn out," said the dealer contemplatively. "If somebody

let that pup's grondmother out when they shouldn't ha' done, it might come out even unto th' third an' fourth generation."

" Ah think its mother had a neet out, too," said Sam.

" Ah once bowt a pup for a red setter an' it turned out a Dalmatian," said the dealer.

" One of them curran'-puddin' dogs? " asked Sam.

" It's as true as Ah'm stonnin' here," asserted the dealer.

" Ah wouldn't ha' cared, but we kessuned it Tiny," said Sam. " It'll answer to nowt else."

" Is it obaydeyant? " asked the dealer.

" Ay," said Sam. " We con make it do owt it wants."

" What dun yo' feed it on? " asked the dealer. " Yo're happen feedin' it wrong."

" It'll eat owt," said Sam. " It's etten th' basket it should sleep in, an' th' blanket, too. It's etten th' hond broosh at side o' th' fire-place, and it'd getten hawf o' th' clooas-line down when th' missus poo'ed it back. It refuses nowt."

" Ah dunnot like 'em too tickle about their meat," said the dealer.

" Ah dunnot like 'em tickle misel'," said Sam. " But there's a mite o' difference between bein' tickle and shiftin' hawf o' th' doormat."

" Ah'll bet tha could train that dog to a gun," said the dealer.

" Tha could train it to a cannon," said Sam. " Tha'll ha' to have it back."

" Ah couldn't do that," said the dealer.

" If tha doesn't Ah'll set it on thee," said Sam. " It worried two cats last neet. See 'im off, Tiny."

Tiny bared a couple of tusks and imitated the rumble of a train.

" Ah'm prepared to allow thee discount," said the dealer. " Ah'll knock thee a shillin' off . . . or tha con have a pup chucked in."

" One as 'as etten its pedigree? " asked Sam sarcastically. " Ah'm havin' no more pups fro' thee. Ah'll swap thee this dog back again for a globe o' gowdfeesh. Them'll none jump on mi bed th' fust thing in a mornin'."

" Ah couldn't do that," said the dealer.

" Seck 'im, Tiny," said Sam.

Tiny " secked 'im " until the leash threatened to break.

" Tie 'im up theer," said the dealer, " an' pick thi gowdfeesh."

" Ah'll ha' that lot," said Sam. " What dun yo' feed 'em wi'? "

" Ants' eggs," said the dealer.

" Uncle to thee," said Sam. " Ah'll set it at thee again if tha starts thi 'anky-panky wi' me."

"These is 'em," said the dealer. "Fourpence a packet."

"Ah thowt tha wor pooin' mi leg," said Sam. "Anyhow, Ah'm fain they dunnot eat pedigrees, or else there might be another Jonah do at our house."

So Sam made his way home with his bowl of goldfish, with the despairing howls of Tiny growing fainter and fainter in his ears.

"What's tha done wi' Tiny?" asked Gladys.

"Ah've swapped 'im for these gowdfeesh," said Sam.

"What good are they?" asked Gladys. "Con we eat 'em?"

"They look nice in th' window," said Sam.

"Ah'd sooner 'ave a aspidistra," said Gladys.

"It's allus wrong so what Ah do," said Sam. "Ah getten shut o' Tiny ony road."

"Ah's miss him," said Gladys. "'E met me wi' a smile every time Ah come in."

"'E met me like a troop o' cavalry," said Sam. "Ah con manage very weel bout 'im meetin' me."

"Ah weesh tha hadn't left 'im," said Gladys. "Ah'd just getten used to 'im."

"Wheer could we ha' kept 'im if he'd grown ony more?" asked Sam. "It wor like keepin' a camel."

"Th' house'll not be th' same," said Gladys.

"Ah'm gooin' a 'avin' a gill," said Sam in disgust.

He donned his billycock and opened the door. The next moment he was on his back in the lobby and Tiny was over him to lick the outstretched hands of Gladys.

"He's come back, Sam," said Gladys. "An' we'n getten the gowdfeesh an' o'."

Sam raised himself from the floor, picked up his billycock, and rattled the ribs of the yelping Tiny as the dog dashed through the door of the front room. "Ah'll murder it," said Sam.

"Tha'll do nowt o' th' soart," said Gladys. "It didn't mean owt by it."

"Get it teed up afore it does any more damage," said Sam.

When they both went into the front room Tiny was sitting there on the hearth-rug with a seraphic smile on its face, and its tail wagging genially.

"It looks as though butter wouldn't melt in its mouth," said Gladys.

"Wheer's th' gowdfeesh?" asked Sam. "It's etten th' gowdfeesh . . . an' it's supped th' watter."

"Eee! Tha nowty dog," said Gladys.

"Tha nowty dog," mimicked Sam. "If it eat mi arm up to mi elbow tha'd pat its head an' say 'tha nowty dog.'"

"It must ha' been hungry," said Gladys.

"It wor," said Sam. "It allus is. Tha could feed that dog all day an' it'd be lookin' at thee wi' its een comin' out o' its head, an' its tongue lollin' about like a big red bowster. Tha has to stoke that dog, not feed it."

"It doesn't eat that mich, Sam," said Gladys.

"It etten mi gowdfeesh," said Sam, "an' it etten its pedigree."

"Ah wonder what made it eat its pedigree?" asked Gladys.

"Ah expect it'd read it," said Sam. "It meant keepin' it dark."

★ ★ ★

TOM, DICK AND HARRY

—or Thomas, Richard and Henry: names popular in life and literature. Some well-known fictional characters bearing these names appear below. Can you recognize them? Score one point for identifying the character, one for the work in which he appears, and one for the author, making a possible total of twenty-seven. The answers are on page 88.

1. *On his first day at Rugby, this schoolboy had all the wind knocked out of his small carcass at the climax of an epic match.*

2. *Hide-and-seek in the Scottish heather—he was on the track of German spies. The clue: "I counted them—High tide, 10.17 p.m."*

3. *His chief defect was chewing little bits of string, which led to complicated internal trouble and an untimely death.*

4. *Five days wandering in the caves, but a treasure trove of twelve thousand dollars was this American boy's reward.*

5. *A whale of a hero!*

6. *This baronet headed a family with terrifying canine associations.*

7. *He was the darling of the crew, but now he's gone aloft.*

8. *Amiable and disreputable, but he married the Marchioness in the end!*

9. *This famous doctor and a murderer were in league together, but eventually the murderer got the upper hand.*

★ ★ ★

When you have read this copy of ARGOSY why not pass it on to a member of H.M. Forces?

LOVE-LETTERS

"Maria," I said, "tell me, what were you writing"

by JOHN INGLIS HALL

IT was during a hot summer in Gibraltar that I became, for a time, a professional writer of love-letters.

It happened like this. I returned to my flat one morning at midday to find my fat cook, Maria Serafina, sitting at the wooden table in her kitchen, writing instead of preparing my lunch. Maria Serafina did not usually neglect me, so I made no comment but gave her a cheerful "Qué tal, Maria?" as I walked by down the cool, tiled corridor towards my bedroom.

Ten minutes later, when I returned to the living-room, changed and clean, I looked again across the corridor towards the kitchen. Maria Serafina was still writing, and I sat down and watched her quietly. Two letters lay beside her, already finished: she was at work on a third.

Maria Serafina was a woman of quite splendid proportions, and a romantic. An exquisite cook who, according to rumour, had overfed two husbands into early graves, she was never happier than when preparing immense meals which she served with a noble elegance, smiling with pride as she brought in each dish.

Until this particular day, however, I had never regarded her as a writer. Hitherto, she had only been known to write menus when I had guests. For these, she used a combination of English, Spanish, and her own personal spelling. Her versions of the names of Anglo-Saxon dishes were phonetic disorders of peculiar distinction. Her best menu I preserved for posterity. It read: "Stuftamata. Harris Chew. Ronjeli wit Pitches. Angeles onospac." The Harris Chew was the only one which, momentarily, defeated me. It conjured up in my mind a mess of choice tweed in an aromatic Eastern gravy: it was, in fact, Irish Stew.

"One moment, Señorito," she called out at last. "I am just finishing . . ."

The nib of her pen spluttered and she sighed tremendously. Maria Serafina's sighs were impossible to ignore, I suspect even by seismographs. To hear her sigh was like listening to the Himalayas breathing in their sleep. She lay sprawled across the table, her shining face almost on a level with the paper, and out

of the corner of her mouth protruded a small, pink, wet snail of tongue. At last, she put down her pen and sat upright, yawning and stretching and raising her arms above her head. I watched the mighty lines of her pectoral muscles, for she retained, in spite of her vastness, or possibly because of it, a perceptible physical charm. She spotted this, and smiled at me as she spoke.

"There!" she said. "They are all done! And now, let us make your tortilla. There is a little melon with ham and a spoonful of green mayonnaise to start with. It is too hot for anything heavier."

She fanned herself for a moment with a newspaper which she had picked up from the table. From the street below the long window of my living-room, two lusty, bawdy, Spanish female voices rose for a moment, shouted a few phrases, laughed, and were silent. Footsteps echoed in the street below; doors slammed inside houses; there were distant clatterings of knives and forks on crockery—the lunch-time sounds of Gibraltar back streets.

Maria Serafina came into my room from across the passage and fiddled with things on the table, saying nothing. I guessed that she expected me to question her about the letters, so let a little time pass before yielding.

"Maria Serafina," I said, after waiting until the silence became almost oppressive, "tell me, what were you writing?"

Maria Serafina shrugged her tremendous shoulders and smiled archly. She was preparing to enjoy herself.

"Love-letters," she announced.

"Surely not your own," I said, deliberately tactless.

"And why not, Señor Comandante?"

"Then why three?"

She left the room and went to the kitchen to start cooking my lunch. I followed her to the doorway.

"A pity," she said to me over her shoulder, from in front of her stove. "But the Señor Comandante is right. They are not mine. I write them for Laura, Encarnación, and Paquita, the girls who work in the other three flats."

"But why don't they write their own?"

Maria Serafina laughed at my ignorance. "Because I am the only one in the building who can read and write, Señorito! And imagine, they have each of them three lovers! It is hard work."

"And in whose time?"

"But do you eat well, Señor Comandante—no, not well, perfectly? And is your flat always clean, and are your clothes always washed and mended?" she asked, by way of an answer.

To this there was no reply. Then, suddenly, an idea struck me. "You are a cook, Maria, a master cook, and I am a writer.

Would it not be better if you stuck to your cooking and I wrote the love-letters?" I said.

Maria Serafina put down her frying-pan with a clink on top of one of the gas-rings. The hot fat hissed and spluttered as she laughed joyously. "Ai, Señorito, but it would be splendid! And the girls would like it! This evening I shall ask them."

The thing was as good as done. That evening, at around half past six, I became official writer of love-letters to Laura, Encarnación and Paquita.

I decided to begin my new assignment with an examination of the state of my clients' affections, so as to be able to conduct their correspondence with discretion, feeling, and in accordance with their secret desires. They were summoned on three successive evenings by Maria Serafina. Before they came, I talked the matter over with her, and it became apparent to me that she had made herself responsible only for the physical machinery of their love-lives by means of her letters. Her system, roughly speaking, was to organize an orderly series of consummations.

My intention was to concentrate on psychological factors, establish preferences, and herd each girl, by stealth, in the direction of the altar, on the arm of the right man. So, for the interviews, I told Maria Serafina that I would send her away, though as she was in charge of my household, it would still be her privilege to introduce my clients.

The first to be presented was Laura from the flat above. I heard Maria Serafina's cheerful voice greet her at my front door. There were whisperings and laughter. Getting up from my armchair, I went over to the door of my living-room, opened it wide, and looked round at them, standing together in the half-light of the windowless hall.

"Venga, niña," I said, beckoning to Laura.

They came towards me and I bowed them into the room with elaborate gallantry. Laura I had seen often, but never studied closely. She had been for me a voice, husky yet shrill; a distant, interrupting peal of laughter when I was working; a squeal denoting the hidden possibility of a pinched behind; the clatter of high wooden heels on the marble stairway up to the flats. Physically, she had existed for me, too, but with a certain vagueness—white teéth, black hair generally untidy, a spare figure, and, when she was on the way home, a black lace head-shawl and a red flower; a woman, and therefore to be quizzed in war-time Gibraltar where women were few and closely besieged.

Nevertheless, I was seeing her for the first time with opportunity and intent to observe. As she stood in the doorway, I

noted that she had once been very pretty, but that her skin was beginning to dry up, as the skins of some quite young women do in Southern Spain. Her face was too thin and there were deep, dark lines under her eyes, which were black and darkly brilliant, the whites very white, and above them very black, thick eyebrows, plucked at the edges. She had sensual, finely shaped lips, rather thick and heavily painted; dark skin, lightly powdered, and no rouge or colour on her sallow cheeks.

"Well, Laura," I said with a smile, "come in and sit down."

I liked her. She had the vivid, naïve animal charm of the physically experienced, accompanied by a certain deference to my male authority, and a trace of shyness, on account of this new social situation which she did not know quite how to handle.

"Maria," I said, nodding towards the door. "Remember, you promised to go!"

Maria Serafina laughed protestingly, and Laura laughed too, pushing her towards the passage, pretending that she was unwilling to go, which was true.

"Vaya, mujèr!" she cried. "Don't keep the Señor Comandante waiting." Her words were intentionally double-edged, and she looked at me meaningly over her shoulder as she spoke.

When Maria Serafina had gone and the door was closed behind her, Laura turned to me, squaring her shoulders, and stood very upright, with her feet close together, so that any bodily advantages she possessed were instantly apparent. Her black dress, cut low at the neck, was worn and badly made but her hips were still firm, her waist small.

Smiling pleasantly, she looked at me for a moment, sizing me up, then went slowly over to my armchair. She walked with the elegance of Spanish women, from the hips, but not entirely unprovocatively. Her pose in the armchair was demure, however. She pulled her skirt down over her bare legs. I noticed that she had washed her feet in my honour, and wore sandals with very high heels.

"Thank you, Señor Comandante, for offering to write our letters," she said. "Maria Serafina has told us about it."

"It is perhaps easier for me than for Maria . . ." I observed tentatively. She raised her eyebrows and put her head on one side. "Perhaps."

"Now, tell me about your lovers," I said—and I used the word "lovers."

Laura looked at me sharply. "I only send real love-letters to Ramón, my nóvio," she said. "The others, well, they are just—appointments. A caballero like you will surely understand . . ."

"Then it is to Ramón that we must be really passionate in

our letters," I said. "Good, Laura! That is a beginning."

I was feeling my way, professionally speaking, but it was also pleasant to find that the girl stimulated me. She hesitated for a moment, thinking, then pealed with laughter, the laugh I had so often heard echoing across the street from the flat above.

"Ah, no, Señorito, I mean Señor Comandante! They must all be good letters and say just the same things—you will know what things . . . you are a man. Only I shall know that Ramón's letter is really a love-letter. But they must all think they are love-letters, including Ramón. You understand?"

I understood perfectly. "Ah yes, I see the situation," I said, trying to look owlishly wise, because Laura attracted me, and I felt that a scribe should conceal his feelings from his clients. "Do you wish me to write any of these letters now, Laura?"

"Oh yes," she said, nodding her head vigorously, eyes shining. "We must try you at once! You see, I am wondering what letters from a real caballero, one who knows how to say beautiful things—not like Maria Serafina who just writes the sort of things she said to her husbands—will do to our men! It might make them . . . It might—oh, change everything."

There was a touch of pathos about her. Her voice seemed to plead for something beyond the possibilities of letters, beyond the capacity of anyone to put right in all the years.

"No," I said gently. "No. Letters don't change very much, Laura. But they will be good letters, I promise you. And now, tell me all their names, and where they live."

I walked over to my desk, took out a pad of paper, and unclipped my fountain pen from my tunic pocket. Laura watched me as I sat at the table beside her and waited for her to begin.

"First, there is Ramón," she began in a quiet, reflective voice. "Ramón, he lives in La Linea. He is a carpenter. Then Paco; he is in Cadiz, where my mother comes from. I see him when I go to see my grandmother, and when he comes to La Linea, perhaps two or three times a month. He works in a shop. He is very generous, very kind to me. I loved him once, with love. But not now. I see him only sometimes, so that is good, isn't it, Señor Comandante?"

She looked up at me for approval. I shrugged my shoulders, but not indifferently. "What do you want me to say, Laura?" I asked. "It is your life. What about the other one?"

"Ah yes," she said. "I forgot for a moment that you knew everything from Maria Serafina. Of course, there is Jacky. He is a Sergeant at Garrison Headquarters. He is very big, very handsome, very tall: and so strong that—Oh, Jacky!"

Laura sighed as she cried out, then laughed with me at herself.

" But I love only Ramón, you understand, Señor Comandante," she added. " I think you are a man who has loved many women, yes? Well then, Jacky—he is very beautiful. Oh, a man, you understand, a man. He has red hair, and hairs . . ."

She brushed the dark down on her own arm, pensively, with her hand, then went on: " He loves me very much and wants me to marry him, but I don't want to. His home, his family—You see, I would not be the same there as I am here, just a woman. He does not know I have other men—and Ramón. But you will understand, Señor Comandante. You are an Englishman. Not quite a real Englishman, I think, but—"

I held up my hand and stopped her. " Yes, of course," I said. " I know what you mean."

" He gives me food," she said simply. " Extra food for my family, my mother and my sisters. Life is not easy in Spain. My father was killed in the Civil War. It is very difficult to feed the family. Jacky arranges for things to be sent to Spain for me, and money too. He is a good boy."

There was a silence between us, during which I began to think well of Laura—very well indeed.

" And now, these letters," I said at last. " Which one first? "

Laura laughed. " Why, Ramón's, of course! But please, Señor Comandante, I could not ask you to write three letters, new letters, different letters, each time. That would be too much to expect of your kindness. We always send the same letter to them all. They never meet, and love-letters are, after all, only love-letters, aren't they? There is no need for different letters, as long as they do not know, and as long as I know which one I am really writing to, is there, Señor Comandante? "

The glance that Laura gave me made me feel like a very simple, uncomplicated child, unexpectedly confronted with eternal truths. It was useless to argue, so I picked up my pen and began to compose the first letter: *Mio querido Ramón* . . .

Then there was Encarnación. She was brought to see me the next day. Maria Serafina was in something more than high spirits when she put her head round the door of my living-room to announce her. She was never able to conceal her emotions, and when something caused her to be in particularly brilliant form, the appearance of any portion of her round a door, even an arm or a leg, was liable to betray instantly the state of her mind. She glowed and shone.

So when her head appeared, I knew that she could have done very little of my cleaning or washing that day, but had spent the major part of it gossiping with Laura, and preparing Encar-

nación and Paquita for the splendours of their coming visits to me. I had not seen her since breakfast, so she had had plenty of time to talk. It was evident at once that I had scored a resounding success with Laura.

"Ai, Señor Comandante!" she cried. "Ai! The letter! Famoso, Señorito, famoso! Laura showed it to me this morning —a dream! Soon you will be writing all the girls' love-letters for them. They will all come to you. You will be King of Love-Letters for the whole Rock!"

"Maria! I hope not!" I said, alarmed. "I do most sincerely hope not!" I wondered briefly how such a title would sound if it filtered through to the Governor's Office, or even to that of my Commanding Officer. My conclusions hardly bore thinking about. "I warn you, Maria, I shall do no more than three lots of letters—and possibly yours, if you need any," I said.

"Mine, Señor?" Maria Serafina raised both hands above her head and let them fall again. "I am an old woman. I write no letters any more. Love is better in the heart than on paper, Señorito, isn't it? But we must not tell our girls that, must we? And now, here is Encarnación."

She opened the door and pushed Encarnación in to me, then shut it behind her, crying out as she did so: "Vaya tú!"

Encarnación now stood before me, small, still, stockily built, dressed in a cheap printed cotton frock. She was smiling broadly. I knew that this quietness could only be a momentary shyness, because her voice, particularly when it was raised in song, notably flamenco, was one of the more strident features of the varied complex of noises in our street. Her dancing, too, was an accomplishment which, from time to time, caused the roof of the building to tremble, particularly on washing days.

The girl was, in fact, highly deceptive; solidly built and apparently slow, she was a tornado of energy when roused, but in the presence of her masters, she was capable of being as good as gold.

"Qué tal Encarnación," I said. "Come in and sit down."

"Thank you, Señor Comandante," she said demurely, and perched on the edge of my armchair like a plump, full-bosomed little thrush after a particularly good morning among the worms on the lawn. I waited for her to speak, but she sat, tongue-tied.

"Well, Encarnación, these letters . . ." I began. "Maria Serafina has told you, of course?"

"Oh si, Señor Comandante, she has told me everything, and so has Laura. It is very kind of you, I'm sure. Laura told me what beautiful letters you had written for her, but I had no time to have them read to me, because when Laura lent them to me

I could not find Maria Serafina. She was out shopping. But Laura and Maria have told me that they were most beautiful."

"You know there was only one, Encarnación?" I asked. "I mean, one that she sent to all three boys?"

Professionally, I was learning fast. Laura had convinced me the day before of the practicability of a single omnibus love-letter for general distribution in Southern Spain, and I determined to sell the idea both to Encarnación and Paquita, if possible.

"Yes," she said. "But, Señor Comandante, please! May I suggest that one letter will not do for me? Really, it won't. My three boys—well, to tell the truth I have got more than three, in fact almost four—they all live on the Rock, quite close together. In fact, they are all British soldiers."

"And therefore you want to write them separate letters?"

Encarnación squirmed on her seat for a second, smiling at me, but she stuck to her guns. "Well, no, Señorito, perhaps not to all of them. The fourth is not quite . . . well, not quite ready. You understand?"

"Ah yes, Encarnación, I understand," I said.

"Naturally, the Señor Comandante would understand! I have heard from Maria that he has had many, many mistresses in many, many lands, and so knows about these things," she said naïvely, searching wildly for a compliment and, on the whole, not doing outstandingly well.

I changed the subject briskly.

"Now, tell me, Encarnación, who are your three—or is it four—gallant soldiers? And where do they live?"

"Three, Señorito," she said with finality. "There is Tommy Boyle—he is at the Camp of the R.A.F. He is a cook. Then there is Jaime Blacker. He is in the Office of the General of Anti-Aircraft Artillery. And Ben Coope. He is in the Radio."

"And is there any special one you would like to please . . . well, particularly?"

Encarnación wrinkled her nose. "No," she said. "No, Señor Comandante."

"I see. You love them all equally?"

"No," she said again. "No. I do not really love any of them at all, Señorito. I have loved men in Spain, yes—in La Linea, in Algeciras, in Calpe, and even, once, as far away as Malaga. But you understand, I am going to marry either Tommy or Jaime or Ben. You see, Spaniards, Señor Comandante, they are very nice, very handsome, very good lovers, but not very good husbands, verdád?" I tried to make some gesture which would indicate that I had never been a woman, or married to a Spaniard, and therefore lacked experience.

By and large, I probably failed, but Encarnación continued: "But I do not understand Englishmen, Señorito, or not very well. They are all nice boys. They are all nice, big, strong, young boys, and they get me plenty of food to take to my brothers and sisters in Spain; and now, they even make love very well.

"Please, Señor Comandante, I want very much to marry one of these three English boys—but none of them asks me! If I send all of them the same letter, it may always be the wrong letter, so I thought it might be best to write three different letters, all inviting them to marry me—oh, very carefully, without them knowing it—and sending them to each one in turn!"

My yells of inward, sympathetic laughter over Encarnación's reasoning were painfully hard to suppress, but I managed it by getting up and walking over to the window and looking out for a few moments into the street. When I had recovered, I said: "But Encarnación, isn't this really just the same thing as sending the same letter to each one?"

"Not at all," she said very positively, evidently shocked by the slowness of my mind. "Supposing we sent the same letter to all three and it was successful, and they all asked me to marry them the next day. I should be in a worse position than ever. How would I choose?"

This conversation with Encarnación I still value more highly than rubies. I did not tell her that I thought it unlikely that any letter of mine would hasten a proposal of marriage—or, indeed, any other kind of proposal. However, if she believed that it might, then it might. So runs the world. I took up my writing-pad and pen. "In Spanish?" I said.

"No," said Encarnación, shaking her head. "In English, please, Señor Comandante. I think that would be best."

My darling Tommy . . . I began.

Finally, there was Paquita. Paquita was quite new to our block of flats. She had appeared on the scene unobtrusively and quietly, about three months before. Paquita was really only a child, and looked younger than her sixteen years. Exceedingly pretty and serious of face, with beautiful colouring and an exquisite cream velvet skin, her hair was a dark chestnut brown, streaked with veins of brilliant gold.

Wherever she went in Gibraltar, eyes followed her relentlessly, and her only defence was to hold herself proudly to her full height and look more serious than ever. It was one of the pleasures of life to meet Paquita on the stairs. She would stand to one side and smile shyly with lowered eyes, her long lashes almost flat on her cheeks.

Maria Serafina, Laura, and Encarnación all spoilt her and petted her, protecting her maternally from the marauding crowds of men. They knew that many suggestions, not all of them honourable, would be made to her, so they brought her to work in the mornings and took her home at night. In her, they recognized their own days of innocence, remembering how quickly they had passed. It was delightful to watch their solicitude, and I was astonished to hear from Maria Serafina that she was already writing to three nóvios in Spain.

"Of course," she had said to me, "Paquita is very pretty—the loveliest girl in La Linea. But three! Just as bad as the others! Señor Comandante, of course I am a woman and you are a man—but isn't it a pity?"

"Not if she is a sensible girl," I said.

Maria Serafina shook her head. "There are no sensible girls," she said. "Not in Southern Spain, while the country is so poor. I remember Laura, ten years ago. She was almost as pretty as Paquita—not quite, but almost. Their families send them out to work. The rest follows."

On the third evening, Maria Serafina brought Paquita to me. As usual, she was gentle and kind to her, and Paquita looked quite ravishingly beautiful. Maria led her into my room by the hand, like a little girl. "Here she is, the naughty child," she said. "The Señor Comandante will write far better love-letters for you than old Maria. You have only to sit down, pequeña, and just tell him what you want to say."

She tiptoed to the door and kissed the tips of her fingers to me as she closed it behind her. I sat looking at Paquita for a moment, quite dazzled by her freshness and the sweetness of her expression. For a little while she was confused and could find nothing to say, then she looked up at me and blushed.

"Señor Comandante," she said, almost in a whisper, "I didn't really want to come and see you—not at all."

"But don't you want any letters, Paquita?" I said. "Surely you do. Don't be shy, Paquita. I'll write them for you, just as Maria Serafina used to—" and I almost added, "for love."

She smiled now, and lowered her eyes. "Oh yes," she said, speaking more naturally as she plucked up courage. "I do want them, Señor. But I don't really need them, if you understand what I mean . . ."

I was puzzled.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand, Paquita," I said.

"I'll try and explain," she continued. "You see, when I first came to work here, I soon found out that Laura and Encarnación had many lovers—and they treated me, oh, like a little

sister, a little girl. And I'm not! I'm a woman, Señor Comandante. Aren't I? Please say yes!"

I was only too conscious that she spoke the truth. "Of course, Paquita, of course," I said.

The girl was trembling with excitement and indignation. "So then I invented a story. I made them think that I had three lovers too! Just as many as they had. Oh, it was wonderful! They treated me like a woman at once!"

Her eyes sparkled with wickedness, but innocent wickedness, and she laughed—with immense danger to my peace of mind.

"Then, when they got Maria Serafina to write their love-letters, I had to ask her to do mine, too. They were to nobody, Señor Comandante. Just names I'd thought of. That's all."

Laughing quietly, I threw my pen down on the table in front of me. "So what do you want me to do, Paquita?" I asked.

"First of all, never tell them what I have just told you—never, please!" I crossed my heart, then made the gesture of cutting my throat with my finger, like a schoolboy.

"Next, will you go on writing my letters for me? But I don't mean really writing letters. I mean, let me come down and see you when it's my turn, and go away after a little while with three envelopes with some writing on them. That's all. Then, when I do choose a nóvio, if I haven't learnt to write myself by then, I'll ask you to write real ones." She was infinitely touching. I stretched out my right hand and placed it gently over one of hers. For a moment, she did not withdraw it.

"Good, then, Paquita," I said, and stood up. "That is what we will do. And nobody shall ever know."

I left her and went over to my desk, and out of one of the drawers I took a paper bag of peppermint creams, poured them onto the table and divided them into two heaps, one for her and one for me. "There," I said. "If we have no work to do, pequeña, we must do something during the time Maria Serafina expects us to be working, verdád?"

So we ate peppermint creams and talked and laughed like children. I showed her how skilfully I could throw them into the air and catch them in my mouth, as the seals catch their fish at the zoological gardens. Soon, she was imitating me with her own natural grace and young enthusiasm. We made a great deal of noise, and several times, Maria Serafina walked past the door, striving to pierce the frosted glass with basilisk eyes.

At last, when sufficient time had passed, I took my pen and three new envelopes and sat down at the table. "And now, Paquita, these men, these dreams of yours—their names? And where do they live?"

Leaning over the table in front of me, on the far side, she cupped her chin in her hands, looked at me for a moment and smiled, then said thoughtfully: "Well . . . there is Pablo. He is very tall, with blond hair. You see, they are all black-haired in La Linea," she said. "He is also very rich. Then there is Rafael. He is dark, of course. One of them would surely be dark, Señor Comandante, wouldn't he?"

I nodded. "Of course," I said gravely. "One of them at least would have to be dark. And the third?"

She was silent for a moment, watching me through narrowed eyes, then suddenly she gave a little shout of laughter, throwing back her head. "He is called Juan," she said softly. "Your Christian name is Juan, isn't it, Señor Comandante?"

"Is he—a new one?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No," she said. "He has always been called Juan. Always. Ask Maria Serafina. But I am pleased you are called Juan too, because, you know, I have always loved him best."

For a short second, I was jealous of that most insubstantial ghost, then took three envelopes one after the other, wrote on them the names and addresses which she gave me, inserted in each one a sheet of clean white paper, neatly folded, sealed them, and handed them to her with a smile.

My time as a writer of love-letters for Laura, Encarnación, and Paquita was most happy. The evenings spent with them were holidays, at a period when I had had none for too long. During them I acquired, unworthily, as I believe, some small fame, for my letters achieved their ends.

Laura married Ramón three weeks before I left Gibraltar. Encarnación received and accepted her proposal after our second set of letters. The victim was Jaime Blacker. As for Paquita, apart from eating sweets with her, I taught her to read and write, and before I was recalled, she was composing, with me, letters to her first real nóvio.

Her last tribute to me reached me in England. It was a love-letter of endearing orthography and great delicacy, which lies before me now as I write.

She was an apt pupil.

★ ★ ★

DOGGED!

Dogmatism is puppyism come to its full growth.

DOUGLAS JERROLD

RACIN' ADMIRALS

A thunderous clap, a flash of red faces—turbulence and spray!

by DAVID WALKER

AT one side are the Straits of Juan de Fuca, at the other the Saint Croix River. It runs by tidal waters and by river, by mountain and plain, by forest and prairie, by great lakes and small. The law keeps an eye on four thousand miles of border, but the law builds no barricades and posts no soldiers. This is our right that we take for granted, our miracle we should remember daily.

It is deplorable that some otherwise model citizens show frailty about Customs. But better the frailties of free men than the vicious voices of informers. Which is the moral of this story.

Admiral Sir William Box, G.C.M.G., K.C.B., D.S.O., R.N. (Retd.) paced the deck. He wore a yachting cap at the Beatty angle—navy-blue jacket with glittering buttons—knife-creased flannels—buckskin shoes as white as snow. He paced with out-thrust jaw and pigeon toes and knees a trifle bandy. He took nine purposeful steps to port, then blue eyes swept ahead, and he took nine steps to starboard. It was impossible to imagine him pacing anything but decks, and since this particular deck was stable, Sir William's own roll was the more pronounced. After half an hour he halted amidships, grasped the rail, and faced a warm west wind.

The Admiral was not at sea. To starboard, and below decks, and for half a mile to port, lay the sovereign land of Canada. Down there on the larboard beam were the United States of America. Ahead were the Admiral's jetty, his cabin-cruiser *Emma*, and that five-mile ellipse of inland waters popularly called Admirals' Lake—not after this one, who was a Johnny-come-lately settler, but after Vice-Admiral Lawrence W. Breese, U.S.N. (Retd.) and Rear-Admiral Percy Brush, R.C.N. (Retd.), whose homes lay south and north respectively, and who had first come here in sailor suits.

They were no desk-admirals, these—Bill Box a battle-waggon sailor, Lance Breese and Percy Brush destroyer men. If specialized careers were reflected in differing pursuits or hobbies, they certainly were not reflected in various appearance, for the three

Admirals were as much alike as three stubby marlin-spikes—all bushy-browed and built like barrels, all ruddy ruthless mariners, all breezy rulers of the roost and lovers of the ladies, all excellent dancers at sixty-plus. Their accents differed; their language shared a nautical blister. They were cronies after their own bluff fashion.

Bill Box was a widower. That he should have elected to retire to this border lake in a far-flung domain of his well-loved Queen, was just one of those things that happen to wanderers in the afternoon of life. Behind him now, he heard Mrs. McCutcheon, another expatriate, dusting his day cabin. Up to the north and down to the south, and almost simultaneously, he heard a distant crescendo snarl of engines. " Damned old idiots at it again," he grumbled loudly, which was the only way he grumbled. " Another fine day rendered hideous."

" What was it you said, Sir Willum? " Mrs. McCutcheon, always one for a chat, had appeared at the verandah door. She was a fine ample lady in the middle years.

" I said Breese and Brush are a menace racin' those speed-boats like a pair of lunatics. Call themselves damn admirals, my foot! "

Mrs. McCutcheon sniffed at bad language. She continued: " It's no but what a body could expect frae yon imitation navies. I was thinkin', Sir Willum. I was thinkin' about a wee story I heard tell—"

Bill Box did not wait upon this wee story. Two sailing-boats had hove into view, reaching from north and south to meet. They were Snipes. The Admiral cupped his hands. " Ahoy there," he bellowed. " Come aboard! "

They jibbed smartly, sailed wing-and-wing before the wind, and were at either side of the Admiral's jetty in no time. Far away, engines roared in warm-up spurts and faded, and echoes sounded from the wooded hills embracing Admirals' Lake.

" I'll talk to the younger generation," Bill Box grunted for the benefit of Mrs. McCutcheon, who was still hovering. " They've got some sense, which is more than can be said for their hooligan sires."

He watched Ken Brush and Kate Breese make fast with nimble economy, and stroll towards him. They were a handsome pair, blonds darkened and bleached by sun, long lean son and tall slim daughter of tubby admirals. They walked together with the totally casual indifference of old chums or buddies.

" Beats me," thought the Admiral, who had been firm friends with many a lovely lady long ago in Malta, Gib, Hongkong, and too many other ports to specify, but never platonically that he

could remember. "Almost unhealthy, what," he added to himself, taking a healthy old sailor's interest in the cut of Miss Breese's jib.

They were talking. "Crazy as coots," said Ken exasperatedly to Kate. "I haven't had one sail this month without being nearly run down, or capsized by their wash, or deafened all day. And when I told Father last night that half the people on the lake are threatening to bring injunctions, he said to pipe down and come up to date and stop being so pompous. I guess it must be their second childhood."

"I spoke to Daddy, too," said Kate indignantly to Ken. "Among other things, I told him he cost me the Club race last Saturday when I was just taking your wind, remember Ken? Cutting across my bows as if the lake was made for speed-boats. All he said was: 'Buy a decent motor, and you won't have to resort to such shady antediluvian tricks.'"

"Mornin', you two."

"Good morning, Sir William." "Good morning, Admiral Bill. We're just reviling our awful fathers."

"And I've been discussing the creatures with Madam McCutcheon." The day cabin was now empty, but the Admiral lowered his voice. "She says it's no but what a body could expect frae yon imitation navies. Good point, I thought."

They were used to such salty digs, and smiled with Olympian indulgence. Although an Englishman, Bill Box was their favourite Admiral at this point of time; in fact, the only popular Admiral on Admirals' Lake.

"Eight bells. Let's have a tot." But high-pitched roars were swelling from Canadian and American waters. Once more two craft hove into view—not sailing in grace and silence below green Halfway Island, but speed-boats high on their steps at twenty knots—twenty-three freshwater miles an hour. They shot straight as arrows, swung away to the island, bows dropped and wash subsided, and the din died tardily. It was only a couple of cable-lengths away. The tall ladies with picnic baskets were clearly visible as they preceded their stocky husbands ashore and into the trees. Very soon the men reappeared at an eager trotting shamble. They skipped aboard, started up, came astern in foam and flurry, leapt forward.

These three on the Admiral's deck were in a perfect communion of sailorly disapproval, but they watched the antics of the blue boat and the red boat with unwilling fascination. Admiral Brush of the Blue led Admiral Breese of the Red, and he led him a spanking dance—S-turns, U-turns, jumps over the wash, skitter scatter, helter-skelter, howl and whine, in such a

furious game of follow-my-leader as can rarely have been seen on this or any other lake, till the waters boiled and broke and were churned by a hundred opposing seas. Wherever Brush snaked in Blue, there snaked Breese in Red, one length astern, joined by a thread of identical performance and, undeniably, of great skill.

After a while, Brush straightened out and headed, ninety per cent airborne, for the Box jetty. He came and he came and he came, fast as a berserk surfaced torpedo, and still he came, pursued by his scarlet twin, and the lips of the watchers sagged apart, and they were positively, surely, certainly going to mount the land this very next second when Brush swung Blue in a vertical skid to port, and held the turn full circle, and held it while breakers cascaded over the jetty.

Now Blue led Red, or Red led Blue, according to which way you viewed the suicidal merry-go-round. In each matched cockpit a matched yachting-capped, blue-jacketed Admiral sat at his matched wheel, controls rigged to his matched leviathan outboard motor. Each Admiral's jaw was grim.

Finally Admiral Breese of the Red broke circle, shadowed by Admiral Brush of the Blue. The infernal uproar dwindled in a reversed repeat performance over to Halfway Island. There, Red idled till Blue had turned the point. Then she sneaked to lie in wait in one of the many inlets where jackpine clung to crannies of vertical rock. Soon Blue appeared. She hugged the island at a rate of knots—perhaps thirty. Red lurked. Red sprang.

"Torpedo tactics," mused Admiral Box, not without a trace of envy. Sub-Lieutenant Box had also served in the small ships many years ago before he specialized in gunnery. But his nostalgic musings did not last. "Bloody old fools!" he roared. "If I had my way, I'd send them to the bottom. Blank ear-splitting asterisk pair of homicidal maniacs. I beg your pardon, Kate."

"You needn't, Sir William," she replied. "Them's all my sentiments."

"Mine also," said Ken Brush, respectable young lawyer and sailor from Montreal, with plenty of the original Adam, too—except about this Eve, his pal from childhood. "The trouble is they're such darned good seamen that I very much doubt if anyone could sink them, all due respect to you, sir."

"The noise is the worst thing," cried Kate. "Just listen!" Staccato screams and blattering high-power rasps continued. "The Lake was so peaceful until this summer. And it isn't only us. Everybody's fed to the teeth, including Mummy. Couldn't

you do something, Admiral Bill? I mean, apart from actually sinking them. Couldn't you?"

"I wish you would, sir. Sailing is the only thing Kate and I care about—and now that's ruined by our blasted parents. I'll go somewhere else next year. I swear I will."

"It's a sort of a disease, Admiral Bill, I guess; but you're the one person they might listen to."

"I've tried," he growled. "Told me to trim my own old tub, and mind my business—damn insolence. Well, let's forget them and have a drink. Gin and something, or beer lies icy-cold?"

"American beer, Admiral? They say a refrigerator chills the native product best."

"All kinds of beer," he remarked gravely. "This is an up-to-date and splendid machine, America's most notable contribution to my way of life."

"England—" said Kate, "I mean Canada—expects every man to pay his duty."

Which so delighted the Admiral that he went guffawing through the day cabin to fetch all kinds of ale. But he became thoughtful. "A perfectly charmin' young couple," he muttered to himself. "And sailing is the only thing they care about."

"What was it you said, Sir Willum?"

"Just thinking aloud, Mrs. McCutcheon. Just trivial spoken thoughts."

"It's a verra bad sign. Talkin' to hisself is a thing I've noticed lately Sir Willum should ca' canny about."

"I shall, madam, I shall. Canny it is, dearie."

The faithful Mother McCutcheon snorted, and Bill Box brought beer for Ken Brush and Kate Breese, and a large pink gin for himself. It was pleasant in the sunshine.

"Won't you sail over with me, Admiral Bill?"

"No," he said. "I am too old to be becalmed with lovely maidens. My doldrum days are over." Kate laughed. Ken smiled absently, bored. "I shall come under *Emma's* trusty power," continued the Admiral, "and with, I hope, that dignity so sadly lacking in flag officers of certain upstart navies."

He watched them go, dressed alike in blue dungarees and skimpy shirts, those careless clothes that sheathe brave youth. This portly Admiral sighed alone. He sighed for a number of private things, including a son gone down with *Hood*, and a daughter across the world in Ceylon. "Silly old ass," he grumbled.

"I'll race you round the island after lunch," she was saying as they stepped onto the jetty.

"O.K." Ken cocked his head at the hazy west. "O.K., if this breeze holds."

"Talkin' of breezes," called the wicked Admiral on impulse, "why don't you sail a bit closer to the Breese? Take in the sheets and splice them too. In short, raise a family of half-breed sailors." Broadside of sixteen-inch armament, three triple turrets —what a rude salvo from an outdated battleship!

They stopped. They turned. They stared up, paling beneath their tan. They turned back to one another in shocked astonishment, and the boy flushed dark, and the girl blushed in every visible place. Undoubtedly direct hits in respective magazines. Each floundered untidily aboard. They sailed away on far-opposing tacks.

"Hope I did right," thought Bill Box, for, as he well knew, he had done something nobody else had ever dared to do. It was one of those matches the sentimental world expects, and they come to nothing. Even their mothers had stopped whispering about it to testy fathers at bedtime.

These fathers still played peace-shattering hide-and-seek in and out and round about the miniature fiords of Halfway Island. Admiral Box stopped thinking kindly of the young, and resumed vituperative thoughts about the old. If Brush and Breese had been flighty characters, their new speed-mania might have been understandable. But off the fresh water they were pillars of respectability—even worthier, indeed, than William Box himself. Nor did they take this craze light-heartedly. They played their deadly games in most ferocious earnest, as if evolving naval tactics for posterity, and not merely making life hideous for many peaceful civilians and one peaceful retired Admiral.

"Sir Willum," said Mrs. McCutcheon in the galley, "as I was about to say afore Ken and Kate come along—och, yon's a braw laddie an' a bonny lassie, and nae mair tooken up wi' ane anither than a cockerel is wi' a rooster . . ." Her metaphors tended to be earthy. She sighed. "It's no natural like. Well, as I was about—"

"I'm going on a picnic, Mrs. McCutcheon. Time is of the very essence."

"Ay, and it's very essential Sir Willum should learn patience at his time of life." But Mrs. McCutcheon came down to it. "I hear tell," she said bluntly, "that yon daft Admirals has Canada-made boats and Yankee-made ingines . . ."

"What of it? Nothing so strange about that."

"Nothin' so strange aboot it if they wasn't smuggled and not one bawbee of Customs paid." Mother McCutcheon now spoke with that brisk ecstasy that is so peculiarly the hallmark of ladies who have thought up something fiendish.

"Oh, I say, Mrs. McCutcheon, we couldn't do that, y'know, I mean, after all! T'wouldn't be cricket."

"Cricket!" So much for that non-Caledonian sport.

"Besides, my own escutcheon isn't exactly lily-white." Bill Box glanced at his lily-white refrigerator. "No, I couldn't do a dirty trick like that."

"Is Sir Willum feared to take wee risks? Is Sir Willum wantin' for to be deefened the rest of his natural life? Is Sir Willum no after wantin' peace in his auld age like ither honest folk? Is Sir Willum mebbe wantin' a new housekeeper?" She paused and added implacably: "Because that's what Sir Willum would need to get."

Sir William had revelled in risk all his life, and Sir William hated being deafened except by a thunderous music now denied him, and although Sir William did not like auld-age talk, he fervently desired peace. But it was this last threat that forced him into chicanery. Life with Mrs. McCutcheon was bad enough. Life without Mrs. McCutcheon would be intolerable.

No sooner was the disgraceful decision made, than efficient plans were worked out.

"Can you do a drawl like these Maine characters?"

"Och ay, betcher life, I ken fine how to shoot ma mouth off, bud—beggin' your pardon, Sir Willum."

"Granted, dear lady," he said. "And I can talk French-Canadian English to the manner born. Bags you speak first."

A little later, Admiral Sir William Box boarded the *Emma*, his barge and only lady-love, certainly not excepting Mrs. McCutcheon, and steamed with the majestic dignity and proper pomp of his exalted rank to Halfway Island where he made a third at an admirals' picnic, together with Mrs. Breese and Mrs. Brush, those delightful, long-suffering, windswept ladies—also with young Brush and young Miss Breese, who were moody on this last day of the holidays, and even snapped rudely at one another, thus causing their mothers to exchange startled glances.

Box and Breese and Brush took off blue jackets, removed neckties, and relaxed, courtly and jolly, as all good sailors know how to be in the presence of ladies and younger people. You would never have thought that these were rough tough sea-dogs who had ruthlessly sent enemies to the bottom, and would do so again at the call of duty.

"Are you going to give us another treat this afternoon?" asked Box, perfidious scoundrel. "It makes me feel young again to watch and hear such exuberant spirits. Do please play tumble together round the islands."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Box. I'm taking my wife home. All yours to putter around in."

"I too, Box," darted Breese with beetle-brows. "We'll leave you to chug to your heart's content."

"Thank you," he bowed, more grateful than they knew. "I shall proceed about my lawful occasions."

The breeze had dropped to the lightest of airs, but Ken and Kate were having their race. They sailed now along the western shore, level yet far apart, no sign of Ken closing to take Kate's wind. He would inevitably fall astern when they rounded the south end of Halfway Island.

Percy Brush and Lawrence Breese handed their ladies into cramped cockpits and departed north and south at a resounding clip. Bill Box circled idly in the wake of the Snipes, between which no comradely badinage passed this afternoon. There were patches of glassy calm. Sooner or later he was going to have to take them in tow. Emma's twin engines burbled nicely.

Sir William felt the better of an excellent picnic lunch put up by Mesdames Breese and Brush, and he enjoyed the balmy sun. Sir William had reason to hope that the speed-boat menace was nearly ended. But Sir William grew less easy in his mind. "I'm a damned old cad," he said aloud. "And all that Scotch beldam's fault."

"I'm real sorry, Admiral," said the Canadian Customs man, "but we'll have to impound the motor." He looked dubiously at that thirty-horsepower monster, and thought of his heart murmur. He shook his head, a much distressed officer and decent fellow. "If it was just us boys discovered it ourselves, sir, you could pay the duty and nobody the wiser. But when somebody lodges information, that puts us on the spot. First thing, Ottawa would be down on us like a ton of bricks. Second thing, the high jump. There's some pretty mean characters around," he finished darkly.

"What kind of voices would these mean characters speak with on the phone?" asked Admiral Brush very gently. "Any idea, Jim?"

"Some speaks one way and some another," said Jim Dodge, the Customs man. "I've heard hoity-toity English accents you could cut with a knife, and I've heard 'em talk broken like the 'habitants,' and mebbe I might have heard the one actin' out he was the other." He glanced at Admiral Brush, put an apologetic seal on the motor, and said he would be back for it.

Walkie-talkie, just a chance. "Brush to Breese, Brush to Breese. Come in, Breese. Over . . ."

Quite soon Breese did come in, and with a vengeance: " Breese to Brush, Breese to Brush. Know what some blank asterisk has done? Blown the gaff to the blank Customs, not that it's their fault, guy was most apologetic. Sealed my boat. I'll—"

" Any idea who it was, Breese? " broke in Brush.

" Woman with a Scotch voice, broader'n hell. Who's blank Scotch around these parts? Over."

" Who's blank Scotch keeping house for blank limey? Use your blank wits, Breese. Over."

There came through the ether a dreadful torrent of invective, then silence, then a different tone altogether, deep as the growl of a lurking tiger, soft as the slither of a python: " Can you see the British Navy? "

The lake shimmered, mirror-smooth. Through his glass, Admiral Brush spied two and a half miles to the head of Halfway Island where a cabin-cruiser had completed her tow, and a pair of sailing-boats were now tied up. The larger vessel took passengers aboard. She stood out again. Brush reported these movements by radio to the only other walkie-talkie ham on Admiral's Lake, private exchange.

" Can you break that seal, Brush? "

" Teach your blank grandmother, Breese."

" Flotilla action, Brush. Strike Three? "

" Strike Three it is, ay ay, sir. Out, Breese."

" Out, Brush."

Across the ice-calm lake these ice-calm smugglers sped. Nor had it been real smuggling, for the boat that Brush had given Breese and the motor Breese had given Brush were of equal value—fair exchange and no robbery between two nations; both exchequers poorer, true, but neither had gained at the other's expense, and private trade had prospered. The wise reader may agree that this presents an ideal tariff situation.

Admiral Box cruised round between and through the Seven Isles, which lay to the south of Halfway Island. It was tricky navigation, for the channels twisted, labyrinthine. A touch astern on the port engine, another—now full ahead on both, and hard astarboard, and through the cleft she came, neat as a whistle, inches to spare. The Admiral was a master mariner, and nobody knew it better than he.

Usually, Box loved these shaded waterlanes between the hemlock and the pine. But he was out of sorts. He did not love anything much this afternoon, and for two reasons. First, he carried disgruntled passengers who ignored his skill, who loathed his *Emma* and all powered vessels, who had grudgingly accepted

a tandem tow, and afterwards had come aboard because, as they said they might as well do something to pass the time till the five-o'clock breeze, if that ever came, and probably it wouldn't. They glowered glumly now beside him.

The second reason was that Admiral Box, for once in a long, long way, was ashamed of himself. "Never get into cahoots with a damn woman," he thought. "Quite fatal. Ought to know that at my age, what a bloody idiot. Bigger blank fool than I was forty years ago."

He negotiated the last tricky bend, unpraised, and went half ahead on both, and his ensign stirred aft. "What now?" he asked, cheerfully enough. "Want a tow home one by one, or want to wait for a wind?"

"We should have sailed home right after lunch," said Kate. "It was perfectly obvious that the wind would die on us."

"Whose crazy idea was it to race, anyway?"

"Don't squabble," said the Admiral irascibly. "And don't take it out on me."

"I'm sorry, Admiral Bill. You know how much I always love being with you. It's just that every word I say today, Ken bites my head off. It isn't fair." Lips trembling.

"*It isn't fair.* Typical woman's—"

"What do you expect me to be—a typical man?"

Ken Brush turned his back. "Duinno what's got into you," he muttered rapidly.

"It's liverish weather," said the Admiral, peacemaker. "Let's pour some liquid into us. The sun is yet high, so mine must be ginger-ale, alas."

"I'll get it." Kate disappeared round aft and into the cabin without offering to fetch refreshment for her cantankerous friend.

"Go and help the gel," said Admiral Box. He had swept wide and was making now for Halfway Island jetty.

Ken shifted his feet but did not go.

"Do as I tell you," barked Box, whose infrequent barks were apt to induce a reflex action of obedience. This did.

Rear-Admiral Brush, R.C.N. (Retd.) had used Halfway Island for his smoke-screen. Vice-Admiral Breese, U.S.N. (Retd.) had employed the Seven Isles for his. They had just taken station in line abreast, and were devouring the lake at some thirty knots, when Sir William's ever-questing eye and sharp-cocked ear announced them to him. They made a very pretty sight, leaping and spanking and ploughing white furrows from glistening calm. Nobody could deny that they were man-made things of beauty, of hurtling, light-touching grace and speed.

But Admiral Box did not admire them, even for one brief second. He knew instantly that he and his unscreened flagship were caught by the enemy's light craft in open waters. That the enemy meant vengeful business, Sir William had no doubt whatsoever. And a far less gifted sailor would have known what that course portended. It portended that they were closing to ram.

Shelter was still far off. "I'm a sitting duck," said Admiral Sir William Box, alone on his bridge. But having thus recognized desperate odds, he did not despair. Far from it. His mind raced coldly and happily while he held course for Halfway Island. He watched out of the corner of his left eye. His left hand lightly held the wheel. His right hand lay upon the throttles. He waited those fleeting moments through.

Only at the last split second did he turn head and spin wheel hard aport and give full power. *Emma* came round handily enough. *Emma* broadside was admittedly a vulnerable duck. But *Emma* head-on was no duck at all. Her sturdy bows would make matchwood of any flimsy speed-boat. Things happened far too quickly for detailed impression—a split in the double Blue-Red projectile, a thunderous clap, a flash of merciless red faces, a mighty turbulence and spray, gone.

Round One to Box. He brought her onto course again. It was still a long way to where two white sailing-boats lay. He remembered his passengers. "Hey!" he bellowed. If needs be, he would fight this thing out to inevitable, well-earned doom; but he did not want to have Ken and Kate caught below decks; and he reasoned also that even these battle-lusting Admirals might think twice about pressing the attack home if they saw their offspring aboard the enemy's flagship.

"Hey!" again. No good; probably bickering about whose fault it was the wind dropped. He looked aft. Yes, the worst was happening, those very manoeuvres he had known to be inevitable. Brush and Breese had split forces. They came around now in a fleur-de-lis effect that would have seemed most graceful to a casual observer. But there was no casual observer. There was only Admiral Box caught between pincers like his hero's luckless adversary at the Nile.

He looked to starboard. He looked to port. Equidistant, plunging in from either beam. "Too damn impetuous," thought this cunning sailor. Nelson's enemy was anchored, but Box was not. He chose his ultimate nick of time, went full astern on both. *Emma* responded with game churnings and complaints, and Blue and Red shot to a meeting at fearful speed across her bows, avoided collision by superb helmsmanship, circled again.

Round Two for Box. Once again he steamed full ahead. The island was close. He had outsmarted them twice. But he knew and admired the calibre of these suicide-stunt men. He knew full well that nothing but shelter could save him now. He made for the inlet.

What Breese and Brush would do next was a foregone conclusion. Box confirmed this by lightning glances. They were staggering their attacks—Breese first at the starboard bow, Brush second at the port quarter.

Box did the only possible thing—he zigzagged, thus gaining yet another respite, thus losing precious speed. It was the old story of duck and falcon—one flies from one with a fair chance of jigging all the way to cover, but one from two is hopeless.

So it was for Box. They got him simultaneously—Breese from the port bow, and Brush from the starboard quarter. They rammed at thirty knots—crash, splinter, roar!—and spun poor *Emma* like a top. They holed her stout timbers, bow and stern.

The blood of a sailor is ever warm. The blood of these was white-hot. Not only had they been able to put their novel tactics to the one true test—of war, but they had avenged a mortal and perfidious wrong. Furthermore, they were, miraculously, suffering no worse wounds than the painful emptying of lungs caused by steering-wheels in the solar plexus. They gasped and got their breath back. They burnt to wipe that loathsome sneer off Admiral Box's countenance.

"Strike your flag, sir!" bellowed Breese and Brush as one, throttled back now, bows buried deep, sterns dangling.

"I spit on you, sir," called Admiral Box politely. "And upon you, sir." He was settling fast, but the wicked fellow had seen what they could not see from their snug cockpits. There was hope yet. "Taxi-drivers," he added rather provokingly. "Horse marines!"

Brush and Breese now showed faulty judgment. They reversed in the furious watery inferno. Their captured boats came clear and fell. They should have paused to count the cost, for those plywood bows no longer existed. Blue and Red did not settle deliberately like *Emma*. They filled and sank instantly to the uncharted abyss of Admirals' Lake.

After a few seconds the ruddy Admirals emerged spluttering, and swam for shore.

So also did *Emma* splutter and swim those last despairing fathoms onto the eastern shelf of Halfway Island. Her engines drowned finally as she came to rest in seven feet of water, her ensign breaking surface proudly, Admiral Box gone neck-deep to the bottom with his ship.

It was at this time that Ken Brush and Kate Breese floundered wetly from the cabin. They looked all around in a puzzled fashion. They stared at their bedraggled fathers dancing with rage upon the beach.

"Did we run aground, Admiral Bill?" asked Kate absently. "Or something?"

She did not wait for a reply, but turned back to gaze upon Ken Brush, who stared at his lifelong friend as if he had never seen her in his life before.

His handsome face was splodged from eye to cheek to mouth and round to eye again with telltale scarlet bows of Cupid. He was in something of a mess, indeed in so ludicrous a mess as to draw the attention and quench the anger of three lately-warring sailors.

All the ruddy Admirals began to laugh. They heaved and shook and split their sides with belly-aching mirth—Admiral Box aswim upon his bridge, Admirals Brush and Breese shipwrecked and soaked upon the border strand. They laughed themselves puce while Kate and Ken resumed the good work they had left off perforce when near to drowning. They had much leeway to make up.

The Customs authorities, gentlemen all, agreed to let sleeping dogs—one boat and one engine—lie twenty fathoms down and call it quits. Box refloated his *Emma*, and towed her to dry-dock in the cow barn.

Now Vice-Admiral Lawrence Breese and Rear-Admiral Percy Brush race Snipes all summer in ruthless rivalry. Now Admiral Sir William Box takes the apple of his godfatherly eye a-cruising on the sheltered waters, and stuffs him with Mother McCutcheon's cookies, and suffers parents to come along, too.

Now peace reigns again on Admirals' Lake. Good thing.

★ ★ ★

THE CUCKOO

The cuckoo is an ill-bred bird,
It's never seen and always heard;
But then it had no kind Mamma
To tell it what good cuckoos are.
And in its turn the alien nest
Warms no affection in its breast;
So, bachelor-like, it hides in oaks
And makes Elizabethan jokes.

JENNIFER PLOWMAN

WEDDING DAY

What loud uproar bursts from that door!
The wedding-guests are there

S. T. COLERIDGE

The Bride

Happily the sunshine fell more warmly than usual on the lilac tufts the morning that Eppie was married, for her dress was a very light one. She had often thought, though with a feeling of renunciation, that the perfection of a wedding-dress would be a white cotton, with the tiniest pink sprig at wide intervals; so that when Mrs. Godfrey Cass begged to provide one, and asked Eppie to choose what it should be, previous meditation had enabled her to give a decided answer at once.

Seen at a little distance as she walked across the churchyard and down the village, she seemed to be attired in pure white, and her hair looked like the dash of gold on a lily. One hand was on her husband's arm, and with the other she clasped the hand of her father Silas.

GEORGE ELIOT, *Silas Marner*

The Groom

The bridegroom's starres arise,
Maydes, turne your sight, your faces hide:
Lest ye be shipwrack't in those sparkling eyes,
Fit to be seene by none, but by his lovely bride:
If him Narcissus should behold, he would forget his pride.

SIR JOHN BEAUMONT, 1582–1628,
An Epithalamium

The Ceremony

" I wonder where we can find a church to be married in " said Sylvia.

" We dont look as though we were *going* to be married . . . but I mean to buy you a white veil and a piece of lace " said Leslie " here is a shilling get what you can "

Sylvia hurried across the road and soon returned with a yard of book muslin for a veil and ½ a yard of furniture lace.

" That will do " said Leslie and they entered the church.

A middle aged man was busy lighting the church lamps and stared hopelessly as the people entered.

" Please are you the clergyman? " asked Leslie.

" No " said the man " Mr. Roberts who is sorting surplices in the vestry is the parson."

" Can we speak to him " said Leslie quietly.

" Yes sir " replied the man opening the vestry door.

" Oh are you the clergyman? " said Leslie to a tall dark man who was just folding up some clean linen.

" Yes I am " replied the said gentleman " can I do anything for you? "

" Well, we wanted to be married " said Leslie bashfully, " if this young lady may put her veil on in the vestry we could then wait in the church till you are at leisure."

" Yes I think I have time " said Mr. Roberts glancing at his watch " please sign your names in this book and I will ring the bell for the acolyte " So saying he touched a spring bell and very soon a small fair-haired boy appeared in the door way. " Take two lighted candles into the church Tommy " said Mr. Roberts " and place two kneeling chairs in the aisle."

Tommy obeyed and very soon Sylvia and Leslie were kneeling side by side in the church. About 5 minutes afterwards our hero and heroine walked out husband and wife!!

DAISY ASHFORD, *The True History of Leslie Woodcock*

The Ring

Hail, thou most welcome harbinger of bliss!
Accept my fondest, dearest, warmest kiss.
Soon mayest thou, with more than magic power,
Unite their hands whose hearts were joined before . . .

From *The Bijou*, 1829

The Presents

There were few wedding presents. The boys had subscribed a shilling each and had bought at a shop in Llandudno a silver-plated teapot, coyly suggestive of *art nouveau*. The Doctor gave them a cheque for twenty-five pounds. Mr. Prendergast gave Grimes a walking-stick—" because he was always borrowing mine "—and Dingy, rather generously, two photograph frames, a calendar, and a tray of Benares brassware. Paul was the best man.

The service passed off without a hitch, for Grimes's Irish wife did not turn up to forbid the banns. Flossie wore a frock of a rather noticeable velveteen and a hat with two pink feathers to match.

" I was so pleased when I found he didn't want me to wear white," she said, " though, of course, it might have been dyed afterwards."

EVELYN WAUGH, *Decline and Fall*

The Organist

The Organist deserves a word;
He's seldom seen but always heard;
In surplice redolent of starch
He thunders out the Wedding March
And renders hymns with practised ease
Knocking the stops in with his knees,
Pulling the stops out with his teeth,
Pounding the pedals underneath,
Crashing the keyboard with his fist,
A busy little Organist.
And yet, despite his wealth of chord,
The Organist is often bored
And frankly wishes he were not
So impotent to stop the rot,
(This is the outcome of immense
And sinister experience
Of happiness in married life,
Beginning with his own dear wife).
But Duty, Duty must be done,
So when the twain at last are one
And parson, beaming down below,
Signals aloft to let her go
He blows for joy (but not his own)
A final blast of Mendelssohn.

RALPH WOTHERSPOON, *Ready-Made Rhymes*

The Guests

I was put into a pew with Gus, and Flora and Archy. Nurse, in her modesty, went into the pew behind us. I am sorry to say these two children, with whom I had no previous acquaintance, were very naughty . . . Gus had crawled up on all fours, under the seat of the pew, until he was opposite the calves of his sister's legs, against which calves, *horresco referens*, he put his trumpet and blew a long shrill blast. Flora behaved very well and courageously. She only gave one long, wild shriek, as from a lunatic in a padded cell at Bedlam, and then, hurling her prayer-book at him, she turned round and tried to kick him in the face. This was the culminating point of my misfortunes. After this they behaved better. I represented to them that everyone was just coming out of the vestry, and that they had better fight it out in the carriage, going home. Gus only made an impertinent remark about Flora's garters, and Flora only drew a short but trenchant historical parallel between Gus and Judas Iscariot.

HENRY KINGSLEY, 1830–76, *Ravenshoe*

SINGING WALLS

Damien discovered her as one discovers a strange country

by MADELEINE MASSON

"AN artist," said Père Ponce, crumbling a croissant into his coffee, "should never marry." Damien turned his shaggy head towards the old man: "What else can one offer the woman one loves?"

Père Ponce giggled and pulled at his goat-like beard. "In my time, Damien, one made different arrangements, and in no case did one become involved with a little girl born and bred in a bourgeois family." Damien rose from the table and stood looking down on the old man. For a moment he was tempted to tug at the goat-like beard or to knock the cup from his hand, but he restrained himself; and staring up at the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, thought once again how beautiful it was, and how happy he was to be alive, strong, and in love.

The wedding ceremony was brief. Solange, the little bride who had run away from home to marry Damien, wore a white dress with a wide straw hat that shaded her gentle, innocent face. Damien had done his best to spruce himself up but in his hurry he had forgotten to put on his best trousers, and the Mayor, performing the ceremony, looked with astonishment on the paint-streaked garments which covered the stout limbs of the bridegroom.

They ate a leisurely wedding breakfast in a little café on the quays. Damien had ordered a bottle of Mousseux, believing that in Solange's circle a glass of Mousseux set the seal of correctness on all ceremonies. He did not know that in the great cellar under Solange's home, Monsieur Labride, her father, kept a very fine Clicquot which had been reserved for his daughter's wedding. Nor would he have cared if he had known.

He had only met Monsieur Labride once and had thought him a pretentious old fool—which he was—though a shrewd business man, who boasted that no one had ever drawn the wool over his eyes when it came to a business deal. He had said just that to Damien, who had never made a business deal in his life, and had been astonished and irritated when Damien had said, "You must get very tired of keeping your eyes open all the time!"

It was after this encounter that Monsieur Labride had forbidden Solange to see Damien. He had thought that Solange would obey him as she had always obeyed him. She had always been a gentle and timid child—rather spiritless, Monsieur Labride sometimes thought. But Solange was not spiritless. She concealed her ardour and her loving heart beneath a cool façade, and no one but Damien ever suspected what ideals and desires flamed behind the cool blue eyes in the little porcelain face.

Solange had first seen Damien when she had accompanied one of her friends to an art class. Damien had been called in to replace one of the professors who had gone on holiday and he was enjoying himself teaching a group of well-brought-up young ladies the rudiments of painting. He was, too, though unconsciously, teaching them the rudiments of life; for whereas in the past the lessons had been dull object-lessons centred about plaster casts of heads and hands, or rarely upon a vase of weary flowers, now they had become animated by live models—nudes which set the young ladies giggling until one of them chanced to glance up at Damien's face. Her laughter ceased, and when he strode up to the dais the foolish simpers on the faces of her companions were likewise frozen.

"As far as I can see," said Damien, "you have horrid little minds, they are like dirty, stuffy rooms cluttered up with broken furniture and unemptied chamber-pots. Most of you have no talent, few of you have any imagination, so I cannot imagine why you are wasting your parents' good money on trying to fill your foolish heads with the knowledge of a craft that you will never in a hundred years be able to master. But that aspect of the matter does not concern me. What does concern me is that you should lack respect towards a craft that is sublime. When you giggle at a nude model you giggle at nature, and when you giggle at nature you desecrate beauty. That I will not allow. That is all, Mesdemoiselles. Now pray continue your scribbling."

Four of the young ladies discontinued their lessons but Solange who had never, until then, taken any interest in art, now asked to be allowed to join the class. Monsieur Labride, who had not an ounce of aesthetic taste in his entire make-up, was curiously flattered by Solange's interest in painting and promised her, when the time came, that he would frame and hang her canvases in his study. By the time Solange had sketched a still-life and a fat nude, she had fallen in love with Damien and wanted only to escape from her home in order to live with him always.

Damien was a great artist. His whole horizon was bounded

by his work and he had never seriously contemplated marriage. From his peasant mother he had acquired a wholesome respect for women—in his eyes they represented the heart of the domestic circle and must be provided for. As he had little in the way of worldly goods, he had never given the matter much thought. Damien was thirty-nine when Solange entered his life, a shabby, good-natured man, of whom his contemporaries said, " He has the sky in his eyes and genius in his fingers."

Damien loved his own pictures and kept them stacked in the little room in the rue des Quatre-Saisons in which he lived. He asked little of life, only to be allowed to paint and to eat, for he loved good food and could be induced to part with a picture only when he had been on spare diet for months. Fame meant little to him, artistic integrity everything; and he had no patience with the new generation who slapped paint on canvas without having undergone the long drudgery of copying old masters, and studying anatomy and draughtsmanship.

In a fashion, though he loved life and nature, Damien had lived apart from its moving, pulsing stream.

His meeting with Solange, therefore, was in the nature of a revelation. He was so accustomed to ignoring the insipid china misses that he taught, or met, that at first he did not even trouble to respond to the shy overtures of friendship that came from the delicate little girl, who always wore white at his classes.

Her white garments had, in fact, been his only interest in her. His eye was attracted by the combination of white muslins and coloured girdles which she invariably wore in summer, and then, when in winter the professor did not return, and he continued with his classes, Damien was unaccountably pleased to note that Mlle. Labride still took her place on Thursdays in a white woollen dress enlivened by coral buttons.

From the first moment Solange had fallen in love with Damien. Everything that had been stifled by her conventional upbringing rushed out to meet him. She approved of his shabby garments, of his lumbering and somewhat pathetic boots—the boots of a countryman, of a mountaineer; solid, stolid footwear meant for mountain passes and not for the asphalted streets of a city. She was touched by the stringy tie which generally hung under one ear, by the massive head and great sweep of greying hair that invariably, when he was demonstrating at the blackboard, fell over one eye. There was something real about Damien, something that put to shame the mincing dandies whom her father brought home as possible candidates for her hand.

In the end it was Solange who asked Damien to her home. Surprised, he accepted the invitation, wondering what it meant.

In the great dim drawing-room in the avenue Hoche he was ill-at-ease; the velvet curtains stifled him and Monsieur Labride irritated him. There was, besides, a galaxy of bright maidens and slim cousins who moved restlessly from place to place, flinging impertinent questions at him. So he did not speak but sat on the edge of a Louis-Philippe chair, a Sèvres plate in one hand and a fragile cup in the other.

He was watching Solange, seeing her for the first time integrated in the hothouse atmosphere in which she lived, and he was sorry for her.

He never went back to her home but met her in the Luxembourg Gardens where, at least, they could walk about or watch the children sailing their boats on the pond. He discovered Solange, as one discovers a strange country, and was often appalled at his discoveries. She had, he found, no breadth of vision, but she possessed a delicacy of feeling, a subtle intuition which complemented his own. For Solange these walks were a liberation, though there were times when she felt as if she had come up against a great and immovable boulder, a boulder against which she must pit her fragile strength. There were certain questions upon which Damien was intransigent; certain social conventions that he ignored and, sternly, bade her ignore.

In the past her life had been bounded by her relatives, by her annual holidays at the sea in her grandmother's house where, each year, everything followed the same routine. There were walks and bathes in identical order. During the holidays one forgot Paris and during the rest of the year one forgot the holidays. Damien taught Solange that life itself was a holiday.

Nature, to Solange, had been something tidy—something in a frame. Trees and flowers were solely the ornaments of a garden. Damien made her understand that each tree, each flower, has an individual life of its own. "Nature was not put there for us," he said, "we were put there by Nature for Nature," and it seemed to Solange that when she was with him she breathed more freely, and that when she returned to the avenue Hoche her horizon became constricted.

Through Damien she learnt to use her eyes and her ears, to see human beings as individuals and not, as they had always appeared to her, as solid vehicles of speech and convention. Now she penetrated the surface and saw them in relation to their emotions, as something fluid and at times tender and naked.

When she was bewildered by Damien's logic and a little afraid that he might find her stupid, the warm pressure of his hands reassured her and the expression in his eyes guided her thoughts.

He had never kissed her. The idea had never entered his head.

He was afraid of shattering something precious and fragile. He was quite content to see her whenever she could spare him the time and to think of her when she was occupied elsewhere. He did not try to detach her from her surroundings or from her home. They simply did not exist for him and he forgot that each time she returned home her spirit was irked by the petty restrictions imposed upon her by her father.

Monsieur Labride did not approve of Solange's friendship with Damien. He told her so and expected her to obey him. His fury, therefore, when she politely refused to give up her daily walks was intensified and whereas before he had mildly disliked the artist, now his anger turned to a bitter spite which told on his liver and turned his expressionless face a greyish yellow. Solange listened to his recriminations in silence and then went out to find Damien.

When her father followed her, she led him all over Paris, delighting in the fact that his vanity always made him wear small shoes, and that he must in the end tire of the chase and thus lose her. Lose her he did, for she cut across the Luxembourg Gardens, down the quays, over the Pont-Marie and straight as a bird to the rue des Quatre-Saisons where Damien, besmeared with paint, was putting the finishing touches to a canvas.

He was surprised to see her, surprised and a little embarrassed. He had not made his bed and it offended him that she should see the tumbled blankets. Vainly he tried to smooth the bed with one hand while offering her a chair with the other. For a time neither of them spoke. Solange was uneasy at having forced his door. She knew that he disliked being disturbed in the middle of a painting.

Finally he picked up his brushes and went on working while she looked round the room. Everywhere there were canvases. A great jar of brushes stood on a deal table; a couple of reproductions of Dürer's drawings were tacked upon the walls; a cuckoo clock, relic of his childhood, struck an incongruously cosy note in the general untidiness, and in a corner hung Damien's best suit. Hanging there, it looked exactly like him. Shaggy, baggy, solid, and enduring.

With her eyes fixed on the suit Solange asked Damien to marry her. For a while he did not answer, and then, rising, he looked at her. "You do me too much honour, Solange. I shall try to be a good husband to you," and gently kissed her cheek.

He made no mention of her home or of her father, but removed the paint smears from his face and hands and took her round to introduce her to Père Ponce. He was very proud of her. Pride shone from him as he watched her, noting the long grey eyes

shaded by their dark lashes, and the small white hands, which she held clasped in her lap.

Seeing her, Père Ponce was at first amused and then alarmed. "My dear Damien," he said later, "you must be out of your mind; that child comes straight out of a toyshop window, and an expensive toyshop, at that. Take my advice and send her back at once. An artist, a great artist, must not be bothered with dolls. They break and are no longer even decorative."

And he meandered on, into a long tale about a veiled and heavily bejewelled mondaine who had made certain unmistakable signs at him from her carriage some twenty years before. "I looked the other way," he said proudly, shaking himself as if he had just emerged from a muddy pond.

Damien, however, was not to be persuaded by Père Ponce's warnings. Solange had flown to him for comfort and protection, and he loved her. Thus they were married; and Monsieur Labride was left to pace his great house and to put away the many photographs of his daughter that had enlivened his dreary study.

They went to Normandy for their honeymoon, living at an inn that faced the little harbour and was a source of fruitful interest to both of them. Though married, Damien refused to change his way of life. He had always painted in the mornings and he continued to do so, even though Solange wanted him to walk with her in the country. The evenings he devoted entirely to his little bride. Realizing that at times she might feel a little strange and even a trifle homesick, he played with her as one would with a child and was delighted when she laughed.

With him, she learnt when to laugh and when to remain silent. She discovered that there was no necessity for small talk when two minds are in harmony, and with him she learnt to observe; so that often, long before he himself had noticed, she would point out to him a particularly arresting expression on a face, the position of a hand, or the sweep of colour in a peasant's garment. She could neither paint nor draw, but deep down inside herself she felt what he felt, she translated him to himself and she rounded out his life.

When they returned to Paris they lived in a hotel, an old and shabby hotel, kept by a Swiss who had known Damien's parents and treated him as if he were still a schoolboy. It was the Swiss who worried over Solange's loss of appetite and insisted that Damien buy her a tonic. Damien bought the tonic and was pleased to see the colour return to Solange's little face. Then he began to worry about her health and brought her strange and evil-smelling ptisans, a gift from his chemist.

Hotel life did not suit Solange or Damien. They hated taking their meals under the supervision of the other guests, they hated the thinness of the walls, and hearing the voices of the other tenants raised in anger or in love, and so they decided to move.

It was Solange who found the flat. It was in the rue des Saints-Pères, in an old house tucked away behind a pretentious portico. A house that had fallen, not on evil times, but had simply fallen behind the times and now crouched low in its cobbled courtyard. Its windows looked out companionably on a fig tree, which each year made a determined effort to bear fruit but which, owing to cold winds and lack of good soil, failed lamentably to fulfil its purpose. The rent was low, there was no bathroom, but the rooms were large and well-proportioned. There was a great fire-place frowning beneath a dark marble mantelpiece, and in the dining-room there was a red wallpaper strewn with little golden stars.

Solange and Damien moved in during the first months of spring. They had no furniture, but Damien hired a large double bed and acquired a number of packing-cases from a friendly furniture-dealer. It was very warm, and at first, like two children, they wandered from room to room, standing at the windows and looking down upon the courtyard. The concierge was a kind-hearted old woman and it was she who cooked their meals and lent them plates and cutlery. Her husband, who was less good-natured, asked why they could not provide their own, but she simply shrugged her shoulders, saying, " They are like children, like orphans, and one must help them.".

They were happy. Damien had started a large canvas which kept him busy throughout the day. He was devoting his entire energies to this work and could not bear to be interrupted. He used the big front room as a studio and having moved in his canvases, brushes, Dürer prints, and cuckoo clock, felt thoroughly at home.

At first Solange found it difficult to live without her daily bath, but in the end she found it quite simple to slip round the corner to the public baths, where for two francs fifty she was given a bathroom, a cake of soap, and as much hot water as she wanted.

Yet, though she was happy with Damien, there were times when the emptiness of the flat depressed her. Twice the man from whom they had hired the bed had appeared and demanded it back. Each time, Damien shut the door in his face, but Solange felt that if ever she was alone and the man reappeared she would not have the strength to argue with him. It embarrassed her to have no curtains at her windows. The neighbours, a friendly

Russian couple, were not curious, but even so, she felt that it was tempting their curiosity to dress and undress before their noses and finally, in despair, she hung a great sheet of drawing-paper over the windows so that the light was blotted out.

Solange made no demands on Damien's time. She let him live the life he had always led. Often they went for long walks. Everything enchanted them, the quays, the flower-sellers, the old man who sold ice-cream in summer and hot chestnuts in winter. They had decided to have no children until the flat was fully furnished, but they adopted a cat who delighted them with his strange antics, as he slipped across the bare parquet floors.

Once the big room with the red paper was used by some of Damien's friends to hold an exhibition of " Vitalistic Art," and all day long, strange individuals walked in and out of the flat, appraising the pictures and casting careless or amused glances at the unfurnished rooms.

In the end it was old Père Ponce who awoke Damien to a sense of his responsibilities. " After all," he said, " even an artist must have a chair to sit on, and when I come to visit you, it is like sitting in a station, as comfortless and as draughty. How that little creature bears it, I do not know. Women need furniture. It keeps them safe and amused."

When he had gone, Damien stared round the bare flat. Then he spoke to Solange. " I never thought that you might not like living like this," he said.

She answered, " I know you did not think of it," and there was something in her voice that made his heart contract. He said, " You look pale and tired. Go down to the country to stay with Maman Paille."

Obedient, as always, Solange went down to the country and all the way down, in her third-class carriage, she was haunted by the bewilderment in Damien's eyes. They had so often discussed the furnishing of the flat. She had bought second-hand magazines on furnishing and together they had pored over them, discarding one style of furniture in favour of another, wrangling lovingly over colours and materials. Damien was all for solid, heavy peasant furniture and rush-bottomed chairs. She inclined towards elegant and slight chairs and tables, and longed, with all her soul, for a wide bed with a button-studded bedhead. Finally they had agreed on having a white studio, a pastel-coloured bedroom, a cosy chintzy study and a yellow dining-room.

Sitting on the hard wooden seat on the train, Solange thought of their plans and tears came into her eyes. Damien, she felt, ought never to be worried by material considerations. Perhaps, in marrying him, she had weighed him down with responsibilities.

Now she had let him see that there were times when she hankered for comfort and for respectable furniture, she had failed him . . . She sobbed herself to sleep.

Meanwhile, Damien in Paris was sitting in the empty flat. It was, he knew, the dead season and none of his patrons were in Paris. Therefore it was hopeless to try to sell any of his canvases before the winter. He might, he thought, borrow some money, but even then, it would never be enough to furnish the flat as Solange wanted it . . .

He reached deep into his pocket for his purse. It contained a fifty-centime piece and a medal of St. Christopher. He looked around the dreary room and then, turning his easel with the canvas wet upon it to the wall, he walked out.

The brief holiday had done Solange good. She returned to Paris with a glowing colour and a basket of apples for Damien. He met her at the station, shouldered her bag and the apples, and strode off towards the bus. Solange was happy to be back with her Damien. Had he, she wondered, finished his picture? It was, she knew, the one picture in which he believed and she imagined that he must have been working frenziedly, for he looked tired and drawn.

The sun was streaming into the cobbled courtyard. The concierge smiled a delighted greeting as the couple walked in. Outside the front door Damien halted portentously. "There's a surprise for you."

"For me?"

He nodded, and pushed open the door. The long bare corridor met her gaze, but she walked eagerly through into the big front room. Here she halted and looked about her. Damien, in the doorway, was watching her.

The walls had been whitewashed. Gone was the dingy, dreary wallpaper and in its stead were murals—yes, murals—of a peculiar kind, for the paintings represented faithfully and accurately each article of furniture for which Solange's heart had craved. Here were the slim and elegant chairs, the console tables, the Récamier sofa, the Sèvres china, heaped high with glowing fruit; and there in the next room, were Damien's favourite dressers and rush-bottomed chairs and even a replica of the cuckoo clock.

In their bedroom he had allowed his imagination to run riot, for on the wide panelled doors were great prancing white horses and a beach of white sand with a frieze of youths running beside a purple sea. Just over the hired bed was a tree, a tree with wide and spreading branches, and down by the wainscoting were small furry beasts and a bright-eyed bird.

In the middle of the room stood Damien, munching an apple. Suddenly, in Solange's ears, there was the sound of music, of grave voices singing, and she was possessed by an exultation which mounted in her heart until the walls and their painted furniture and the brilliant medley of colour swung, swirled, and merged into a maelstrom of crimson and blue. Cautiously, his blue eyes wide, Damien went towards her. He stood by her side. "You're crying," he said. "Oh Solange, you're crying!"

She reached out blindly and taking his warm, broad hand in hers, laid her lips upon it.

★ ★ ★

DURBAR AT DEWAS

The chief event of Jan. 1st was the Durbar in the Old Palace—rather a beautiful building in the heart of the town. Dressed in white, he (the Rajah) sat on the *Gaddi*—half bed, half throne—leaning against a white bolster with peacocks-fans waving over his head.

The court sat cross-legged all down the room on each side, we in an alcove on chairs: he would not have us squatting. All offered *nazir* (homage) which he remitted to the servants. His expression changed as each came up: to the Sirdars he was dignified, to the Maratha guests courteous and warm: he laughed behind his hand when the Subahdar, his buffoon, came. (This is a puzzling unattractive man; a spy from Kolhapur I am told. H.H. is always translating his droll speeches and I can't see their drollery: sometimes his turban is set on fire, which makes me wretched: he takes care of Lady, the flea-bitten little dog.) After each had paid homage, the Rajah made a long dull speech about the constitutional changes that he is making; a new advisory council; I believe it is important. No one was much pleased. Then scent and betel nut were distributed all round.

The proceedings lasted two hours, and were impressive owing to the architecture of the fine little hall and to the dresses. But oh the pictures! The dear creature has not a glimmer of taste and on the dark wooden pillars are hung Love me Love my dog or Xmas plates from the Graphic. Even when the subjects are Hindu they are cheap prints, and he has actually put glass balls to swing from the ceiling.

My heart aches, for he is an active and able ruler, and if he lives long Dewas will look like the Euston Road.

E. M. FORSTER, *in a letter, January 1st*, 1913,
from *The Hill of Devi*

★ SCIENCE FICTION CHOICE

PETE CAN FIX IT

They had suddenly driven into a new, strange world

by RAYMOND F. JONES

IT was just outside Wickenburg, Arizona, that Ralph Grandin noticed the first of the signs. In the faint desert dawn he nodded towards it with a laugh. Marcia, his wife, followed his glance with her eyes.

"PETE CAN FIX IT!" she read aloud. "We'd better find Pete quick, then, before the car finishes its collapse."

"It would take more than a guy named Pete to doctor our galloping Susie."

He patted the steering-wheel of their '38 model fondly as it rattled along the highway at a rattling 45 m.p.h.

Thirteen-year-old Jack, their son, looked disdainfully from the back seat. Whatever the skills of the unknown Pete, Jack was certain that *he* could do a job ten times better on anything mechanical.

Wickenburg faded quickly out of sight, and the hush of the desert was broken only by the car's dissonant noises. This was the first holiday in five years for Professor Grandin and his family, and he felt his work on radiation measurements would profit by it.

Besides, he would be seeing Mason at the University in Los Angeles to show him the new detector he had developed.

"Look, Pete's with us again." Marcia pointed to the desert landscape on her side of the road. Another of the weather-beaten signs declared in the same bold black and white lettering: PETE CAN FIX IT.

This was great, thought Grandin. Just like the old times, it seemed. But he knew it wasn't. There was no going back to the past, but if there were only some way out of the bumbling, nerve-shattering idiocy of the present—

PETE CAN FIX IT!

The irrefutable assertion seemed to lurch at them out of the desert wastes. Grandin found himself welcoming the signs. There was no indication as to where this multidexterous Pete

was located or what he could fix, but the calm assertion that Pete could fix it was like some familiar landmark in a barren, fearful wasteland.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could turn the whole world over to Pete?" Marcia suggested whimsically. "If we could just hand him the whole mess and say, 'Here you are. Send the bill next month.'"

"He probably runs a one-horse garage somewhere in the backwoods," said Jack disparagingly.

Grandin chuckled tolerantly. Jack would, no doubt, be the match of a dozen Petes when he grew up. The boy's intuition for mechanical and electrical tinkering was little short of genius. Jack wasn't a prodigy—Grandin and Marcia hoped. But he was a bright lad and might grow up to be a darned useful citizen if he could be steered right—a problem that absorbed Grandin's interest equally with atomic bombs.

Over the magic and the mystery of the desert the cryptic signs led them, and, all at once, twenty miles out of Quartzsite, they saw it—a ramshackle garage with a single petrol-pump. It bore a giant inscription that covered an entire wall: PETE'S. In small letters was the final, uncompromising declaration: PETE CAN FIX IT. It was small and less bold than it had been on the desert signs, as if ashamed of the reality which was shabby in the face of the bold proclamations.

"I was right!" Jack exclaimed jubilantly. "I'll bet he doesn't know a timing gear from a camshaft. Let's stop for petrol and look round, Pop."

"O.K.," Grandin laughed. But somehow he felt a sense of unnameable loss, a nostalgic disappointment as if some childhood dream had vanished, when the battered building came into view.

A few chickens cackled furiously out of sight as Grandin drove up. He turned off the motor, and the swelling silence of the desert shattered suddenly before the pounding of metal that sounded from within the dismal garage.

"Hey, somebody's here, all right," said Jack. "Look at that car that he's working on!"

Grandin and Marcia peered into the dark cavern from whence the sound came. They glimpsed the flicker of a mechanic's lamp and the shining outlines of a new model Cadillac. Something of Grandin's disappointment was dispelled.

"At least this Pete gets the top-drawer customers out here," he said with a laugh.

A figure crystallized from the dimness and shambled towards them. He moved with extreme effort, like some unknown denizen of that dark cavern in which he lived and worked.

In the sunlight he was a man of uncertain twenty-five to thirty-five. He moved stiffly, as if from painfully arthritic joints. And even beneath the layer of grease and grime that encrusted him they could see his splotched skin, with its great unwholesome discolorations.

He approached the car. " How many? " he said.

Grandin and Marcia let their gaze move towards the mechanic's eyes, and with the sudden glimpse into the depths of that intense blue there came an almost tangible shock. There was something in the man's face, a searching, frantically inquiring something that was ravenous, frightening.

Grandin swallowed. " Fill the tank," he said.

He got out to unlock the petrol cap, almost consciously avoiding the eyes of the man.

" You're Pete? " he asked.

The mechanic nodded, inserting the nozzle into the tank.

" We saw your signs all the way from Wickenburg. We wondered just where you were. Seems you have picked on a rather out-of-the-way spot for a garage."

" Sometimes cars pick out-of-the-way places to break down," said Pete.

His glance darted about—from the pump indicator to the tank, to the interior of the car, and back to Grandin's face. " Do you mind," he said hesitantly, " if I ask your name? "

" Well—no, it's Grandin. Ralph Grandin."

" Grandin—" Pete seemed to test the name with his tongue as if searching for some old, forgotten memory. Then he shook his head faintly as he replaced the petrol hose and locked the tank.

" I thought maybe I had seen you before," he said. " Your little boy—he's about twelve, isn't he? "

" Jack's just turned thirteen. Well, thanks, what do I owe you? "

Pete remained motionless, staring intently at Jack. " I travelled along this road when I was a little boy," said Pete slowly, his eyes far away. " My mother and father took me somewhere and we came this way—when I was just about the age of your boy."

Grandin held out a ten-dollar bill. Pete looked down at it as if memory and consciousness were struggling back from some far vista that ordinary men could not see. " When I was a little boy—" he said absently. " But I don't know where we were going—"

Then he seemed to become aware of Grandin and the money. " Let me check your oil. Bad to let it get low, out in this hot country."

" Hurry up, Ralph," said Marcia. " It's hot in the car."

" Better get out and have a cold drink. I'll see what he has in the box over there," said Grandin.

He started towards the store, where aspirin and piston rings were stacked side by side on the shelves. Jack darted out of the car and leaned over the fender while Pete checked the oil. In vain Marcia tried to motion her son back from getting too close to Pete.

" Hey, what are you doing? " Jack's voice suddenly pierced the still desert air. " Hey, Pop. This guy doesn't know a distributor from an oil stick! "

Grandin turned. " What's the trouble? "

He came up as Pete extracted one of the points from the distributor and held it up. " This won't get you much farther, mister. It's about ready to burn right out of the spring arm."

Grandin squinted at the blackened metal disk which was truly almost non-existent. " Guess they do need replacing, all right."

" Seventy-five cents, installed," said Pete with eagerness that was somehow repulsive, as if he were a crow snatching at crumbs from a rich man's table.

" All right. Put in some new ones."

Pete moved away with the jerkiness that betokened intense pain.

Jack whispered hoarsely, " Pop, he didn't get that burnt-out point from our distributor. He had it already in his hand and exchanged it for ours! I saw him."

Grandin looked down at Jack's earnest, excited face. He grinned uncertainly. " That's silly. You must be mistaken, Jack. What would he do a thing like that for? "

" I'll bet a guy in a tumbledown shack like this would do anything for a sale."

" Well, it won't hurt us to give it to him, then. The poor devil must just about starve to death out here, anyway. And he looks terribly sick, besides."

At that moment another figure emerged from the darkness of the garage. A portly man in an expensive suit, and smoking a black cigar, stepped into the bright sunlight. He ambled towards the car as if in resigned disgust. " Hullo," he said. " I see the old coot stuck you for something, too."

" He's just changing our points," Grandin said. He didn't advance the conversation any further, but the man remained.

" That's what I meant. I've been here for three hours trying to get a generator repaired. Not many people stop, but since I've been here that fellow has managed to sell each one of them some parts or service. He must be a wizard the way he can put his finger right on a car's pending trouble. If he didn't look like

a zombie and were in a more accessible place, he would be able to make a packet."

Grandin made no reply.

The man moved back towards the dimness of the garage where his car waited.

Pete returned and installed and adjusted the new points. He replaced the condenser as well, and charged nothing extra.

He closed the hood with a snap. "You'll get there all right now," he said with a wry smile, "and if anybody asks about me, just tell 'em 'Pete can fix it!'"

Jack and Marcia settled back in their seats, and conversation lagged as the miles of highway flowed beneath their wheels.

"We can have lunch in Blythe," said Grandin at last.

"His eyes—" said Marcia. "I can never forget those eyes. They made me think I'd known him somewhere before—"

"I know what you mean," Grandin replied slowly. "I sort of felt the same way. Strange we should both feel the same."

"I hope we never see him again," said Jack. "He gave me the willies. And that petty fiddling with the point—!"

The desert sky turned copper in the afternoon sun, and a pall of heat and depression overshadowed their holiday spirits. They longed for the sight of the ocean and the flashing white-caps of cool waves.

They were just outside Indio when the powerful Cadillac they had seen at Pete's roared by at eighty miles an hour.

"He'll burn out more than a generator if he keeps that new buggy going at that rate," said Jack scornfully. "That fellows like him should have what it takes to get new cars—!"

Ralph Grandin was thinking along the same lines, but not aloud. He was thinking of the past four years and the things he'd done with his life. His part had been small, but nevertheless he had contributed to the weapon that seemed destined to wipe out the world. He felt a spiritual need to devote the rest of his life to atonement.

Grandin didn't know when the change came. It was mid-afternoon and they were a few miles past Pomona when he first noticed it. The sky that had been copper over the desert became more glaring and golden. An eternal pall of dust seemed to fill the air.

There came a sudden, sharp, wrenching jar that made him think that the steering-gear had snapped. But in an instant he regained control of the car.

He glanced in the mirror to see what unseen bump in the road

had caused the jolt. Marcia's face was a little white with the shock of it. "What in the world did you hit?"

"Nothing. Something must be wrong with the car. But it seems to be O.K. now."

He drove on, alert for trouble, but nothing else occurred. Gradually his tension eased and he stepped harder on the accelerator.

"I wonder where all the traffic went," Jack remarked. "It looked as if every man and his dog was on the road a little while ago."

Grandin noted that he had been unconsciously aware of the same fact. The road did seem deserted all of a sudden, but more than that, it was the *houses* at the occasional crossroads that looked deserted and in bad repair. The road itself seemed veiled in drifted sand and dust in which few tire-marks showed. It was as if they had suddenly driven into a new and strange world—a dead world.

His puzzlement grew as the deathliness of the scene increased. Then, at West Covina, they began to see the first of the bombed-out buildings. Marcia gave a faint, shrill cry. "Ralph! This place looks as if there's been an explosion!"

There was debris now even in the four-lane super-highway on which they rode. Grandin slowed down, and twisted the wheel to avoid the rubble.

"We should have heard any blast big enough to do all this," said Jack. "When do you think it happened?"

"I don't know. We saw newspapers this morning. There was nothing about it then."

Past West Covina, the evidence of destruction didn't diminish. At every cluster of homes and buildings it increased. And at last, when they were in a position to glimpse the full skyline of Los Angeles, they stopped in horror.

As far as their eyes could see there were only skeletons of buildings, vast heaps of rubble—and nowhere any life. "Ralph—!" Marcia's hand gripped his arm painfully and her voice was shrill with fear.

"It looks like the pictures of an atomic bombing!" Jack exclaimed. "But it couldn't be. We'd have heard it."

Instinctively, their eyes sought the sky, but not even a bird soared overhead.

"Let's go on a little farther," said Grandin soberly. He opened the trunk of the car and removed the carefully packed detector that he had brought to show Mason. He set it up for operation on the front seat between Marcia and himself. Slowly

he started down the half-choked highway; there was scarcely any need to go farther.

On its most sensitive setting the needle of the indicator was pounding the pin, indicating the intense radio-activity of the atmosphere about them.

"An atomic bomb," said Grandin dully. "More likely a dozen of them to give this radio-activity."

"But we didn't hear or see a thing!" Jack protested.

"I know— That's what I can't understand."

"Could it have been that bump we couldn't account for?" Marcia said. "That felt almost as if we had been picked up and twisted round and set down again."

"I don't know . . . I just don't know," said Grandin. "All I know is that the same thing must have happened to every other large city in America. And we weren't ready for it. This is the New Stone Age."

They stopped and got out of the car and stood close together, silently viewing the vast wreckage of the city. Grandin tried to pick out the bomb-craters. He thought he could see four different ones, but it was hard to be sure.

He knew that their minds were too small to comprehend the immensity of the disaster in all its panoramic horror. But, fragment by fragment, it penetrated their comprehension, to form a swelling bubble of panic.

Marcia began to weep softly. Jack clung to Grandin's hand with young fingers of steel. "What do we do now?" he asked with restrained emotion.

"Away from the cities," said Grandin slowly, "there may be some semblance of technology surviving. It's doubtful. Chaos, invasion, formation of warring tribes of our own people—until we find out what's happening, we'd better isolate ourselves. We'll try to find food and petrol and head inland towards the mountains of central Arizona. It's our best hope of survival."

"Ralph! There's a car coming!" Marcia pointed down the highway.

For a moment they watched as if the appearance of a moving object were some strange miracle in this land of death.

"It's the one we saw at Pete's," said Jack.

The reckless driver wove through the rubble and skidded to a stop in a cloud of dust before them. Abruptly he was out and moving towards them on foot. Marcia screamed at the sight of the gun in his hand.

"What do you—?" Grandin began.

"Things have changed." The man's dead cigar shifted in his mouth. "You can see that. In case you don't know it, we're

probably the only ones left alive in all Los Angeles. I'm heading north, but there's no way through the city. I've got to go round. Lucky I came this way. I'm going to need all the petrol I can get. Put yours in my tank and be quick about it."

"But we can all go together!" said Grandin.

"Nothing doing! We're back to the level of every man for himself. Civilization and that 'Do unto others' stuff is as dead as the million corpses all around us. Get busy, you! I've never killed a man before, but it's not too early to begin."

As if in a trance, Grandin moved towards the rear of his car. He slowly unlocked the trunk to get the quart can he carried and the pliers. As he did so, there was a sudden shout behind him. He whirled about in time to see the robber falling to the ground and Jack wrestling for the gun.

"Jack—you fool!" At the same time, a surge of admiration that was almost painful went through him. The wiry figure of the boy hurtled at the beefy man and then darted away, gun in hand.

"He might have shot you!" Grandin exclaimed. "You were a fool—a wonderful fool."

"Wait a minute," said Jack. "I didn't tackle him all by myself. *She* did it, really. She threw a rock that got him in the head. He was down before I jumped him."

"She?"

Grandin turned in the direction of Jack's gaze. Coming over a near-by pile of rubble were the figures of a woman and two men, all dressed in tattered remnants of clothes.

"That was a close shave," one of the men said.

Suddenly the woman stopped. As if transfixed, she stared at Jack. Her hand clutched the arm of the man who had spoken. "Brad! It's . . . *him*!"

Something about her voice electrified Grandin. The intensity, the terrifying possessiveness, the way she looked at Jack—

"Delsa—no, you can't be sure," the man cautioned.

The man turned to Grandin. "Won't you join us? We have a hide-out over here, a short distance away. We'll exchange what information we have about this mess."

Grandin had been moving forward slowly. Quickly he took the revolver from Jack's hand. He held it before him.

"No—" he shook his head. "We can't risk it. How do we know you aren't—like him?" He nodded toward the prone form of the Cadillac owner.

"You don't, I suppose. I'll admit there are plenty like him. We have to be on constant guard against them. At least we can sit down and talk."

As Grandin's lips moved to speak, the woman pointed towards Jack again and whispered intensely to her companions. " I know it's him. I know it is. Oh, don't lose him! "

In Marcia's frightened eyes appeared sudden terror. " Ralph! She's crazy. She must think Jack is her dead son or something. Oh, let's get out of here—anywhere, just until we can think again! "

Grandin nodded. " We don't know what's happened," he said to the strangers, " but for the moment we want only isolation and time to think. We're heading east again. We aren't deserting you, because there's nothing we can give you. Maybe you're better off here than we'll be. Get in, Marcia and Jack. You turn the car round, Marcia."

As the car spun around, the man who had not spoken made a half-hearted attempt to come a step or two after them. Then he shouted suddenly, " Tell Pete you saw us! Tell him Delsa is not well! "

The words bored into Grandin's consciousness and exploded. He told Marcia to stop. " Pete? " he demanded. " What do you know of Pete? "

Before the other could answer, the woman Delsa broke away and ran towards the car. Her cries were hysterical. " You can't take him now! Not when we've just found him—he belongs here! "

Her fanatic gaze was on Jack's white, stolid face. Marcia whispered frantically, " She's crazy, Ralph. I'm afraid of them."

She started the car again and sped down the highway. When the three strangers were out of sight, Grandin took the wheel. He drove automatically, with the attention of only a fraction of his mind, while the bubble of fear grew. Why was he running away from the three who had come out of the ruins? Already he had abandoned the most elementary amenities of his dead culture. All at once every surviving man had become the enemy of every other man in the bitter struggle for the remaining food and necessities of life.

There was another reason that had driven them away from the strangers, however, he told himself. The light in the eyes of the woman they had called Delsa. Her eyes upon Jack. The possessive compulsion Grandin saw there chilled his soul. He understood Marcia's sudden dread. It was that that drove them away.

The petrol search was hopeless. Every station had empty tanks. The locks of the storage tanks had been broken and the last dregs drained away.

" Everything points to the fact that the bombing occurred long

ago, yet it must have happened within the last twenty-four hours. Without petrol we can't cross the desert. If we can't find any at all, we'll try to find a spot with a flowing well and settle. From there we can explore and find friends—unless everyone has become like those we've seen."

In the back seat, Jack was completely silent. Grandin wondered what thoughts were passing through the boy's mind, but dared not ask. He had just come out of the years of childhood, with the concept of the world beginning to take shape in his mind. Now that entire world was utterly changed without sight or sound of the processes of change.

Dusk began to settle over the ruined landscape. As the darkness deepened, Grandin debated turning on the lights and decided that it would make them no more conspicuous than they had been during the day-time. On the dust-covered road he could not distinguish the many shapes of broken bricks and rocks. Dozens of times the car jolted and swerved, and Grandin groaned and prayed that the tires would not blow.

He didn't know just when it was that he first became conscious of the sound of another car behind them. Suddenly the lights of it flashed upon them, blinding Grandin with their glare in the driving-mirror. At once he thought of the man in the Cadillac. He picked up the gun, and edged the car over and slowed.

Surprise rocked through him when the occupants of the other car merely honked and roared past. It was not the Cadillac. It looked more like a bunch of youngsters in a racing-car.

Then the lights of an oncoming car flashed into their eyes as they rounded a curve. Marcia gasped and pointed ahead. "The lights! It looks as if the whole town of Pomona is lit up as usual. Maybe things aren't as bad as we thought."

"I wonder. There may be complete chaos there. It might be better to by-pass the town."

But as they advanced slowly there was no evidence of confusion or disturbance. Streams of cars were moving in the direction from which Grandin had come.

"It doesn't look as if they've even heard about it," said Jack.

They passed through a quiet residential section and came to the edge of the business district.

"How can things be going on in a perfectly normal fashion here when Los Angeles is in complete ruin only twenty miles away? There should be refugees—"

He pulled up to the kerb before a policeman who stood idly watching the cinema crowds. "Aren't the roads to Los Angeles

closed?" Grandin asked. "Hasn't word of the city's destruction been even heard over here?"

For an instant the policeman gaped, then he burst out laughing. "Another one! You're the fourth this week. Say, just what do they sell in bottles down in Los Angeles? The town bombed again—when's it going to end? I'd run you in, but they had to let the other three go when they proved sober. But get going before I change my mind!"

Dazed, Grandin pulled his head back in and stared at the lighted shop windows. After a moment he got out and went into the nearest shop. He came back and tossed a newspaper into Marcia's lap. Headlines were devoted to municipal scandals and a Hollywood murder.

"Maybe it didn't happen," said Marcia thinly.

"We weren't dreaming it!" Jack protested. "I didn't dream I was tussling with that fat guy for the gun!"

"Look!" Marcia pointed suddenly to a small item at the bottom of the front page. Grandin glanced at the article.

"LOS ANGELES BOMBED," SAYS VISITOR

J. B. Winkler reported to Pomona authorities yesterday that Los Angeles was in ruins, apparently the result of a terrific bombing. Winkler, arrested on a charge of drunkenness, was found to be cold sober but was being held for psychological tests before . . .

Grandin slumped as if something had exuded suddenly from every pore of his body. "Mass hallucination—" he said slowly. "Maybe it was some form of premonition, some flash of vision of the future or of another plane. Whatever it was, we know now that it wasn't real." He glanced back down the highway, where bobbing tail-lights were vanishing in the direction of Los Angeles. "I've lost all taste for a holiday at the coast. How about it?"

Marcia nodded. "Yes . . . let's just keep going—back. I want to forget the awful sight of those ruins, and that crazy woman reaching out for Jack—but I know I can't really forget it as long as I live."

Grandin stepped on the starter. The engine barely turned over.

"Looks like battery trouble. We'd better stay here for the night and make a fresh start in the morning."

After half a dozen futile tries, Grandin finally managed to get the car to start. He drove it to a garage and found a near-by hotel room for them.

Next morning they found the car ready when they called for it, but the garage man looked at Grandin in bewilderment. "That battery of yours was right down," he said. "I checked over your ignition system for shorts and found this in your distributor. It was sapping your battery to death."

Grandin glanced at the small cylinder the man placed in his palm. "I don't know what the devil this is. How could it get in—?" Then his mind went back—Pete, his pain-racked form bent over the car, working on the distributor.

Suddenly Grandin knew where he was going. He spoke with fierce intensity. "We've got to see this fellow Pete," he said to Marcia.

She looked at him as if trying to read his thoughts. "Do you think *he* made it happen to us, somehow?"

"I don't know what I think, but he's the only connection between reality and this dream or vision or hallucination or whatever it is. I'm going to find out what Pete's got to do with it."

"Let's open the gadget," said Jack.

Grandin held it up between his thumb and forefinger. He took out his pocket-knife and prised off the end opposite the terminals. Carefully he tried to pick among the destroyed components, but they shattered at the touch of his blade. Only one thing came out whole, a small object that looked like a glass bead. He held it up to the light and rubbed the discoloration from it. He gasped in amazement.

"It looks like an electronic tube of some kind!"

"Maybe this Pete isn't as stupid as he looks," said Jack.

The heat of the desert radiated about them as Grandin pushed the decrepit car to its limit over the burning highway. By early afternoon they arrived at the shambles of Pete's garage.

There was no sign of life. All the doors were shut and the windows were obscured by weeks of undisturbed desert sand and dust.

"Bet he made a getaway with the cops on his tail," said Jack.

Grandin got out and pounded on the door of the building, but there was no answer. He tried again. Suddenly, Marcia, sitting in the car, waved and pointed to the west side. Grandin and Jack ran round the corner just as a car drove out. It was in an even more battered condition than the building, and Pete was at the wheel.

He looked worse than when they had seen him the day before. Whatever illness possessed him, its ravages were terrible and progressive. "Closed up," said Pete. Then his eyes went wide. "You're Grandin—and Jack! You came back."

"Apparently you didn't expect us back."

The man looked at them for a long moment, and slowly the light died out of his eyes. "I didn't know. It's of no consequence. I must be going now. I have business in Los Angeles, and my garage here will not be open any more."

"Aren't you installing any more of these?" Grandin held out the little gadget he had partly dismantled.

"No," said Pete slowly. "I guess I won't be installing any more."

"Come on," said Grandin with unexpected savagery. "I want to know what this is all about. We went to Los Angeles and found ruins there—ruins created by atomic bombing. I've got a detector that showed the radio-activity—" He stopped. His eyes, on Pete's face, registered first disbelief, then astonished recognition. "Those sores—they're radiation burns! I should have known—"

Pete nodded slowly, painfully. "Yes, now you understand?"

"No. I don't understand anything. Los Angeles is not destroyed."

"But it is. So are Washington, New York, Chicago, and a hundred other cities we've been so proud of. They are destroyed in this continuum—fifteen years from now."

"Fifteen years from now!"

Pete nodded. "I came from out of that time—came back to try to find a way to prevent the holocaust that I had seen. I saw the bombs fall and our cities wiped out in flames. As far as we knew, more than seventy million were killed before communications became utterly impossible. After that there were only scattered bands in the Los Angeles area.

"The first thing I tried was to establish communication with other groups. During the electronic experiments I discovered the principle of that." His fingers indicated the cylinder.

Grandin glanced down at it. "The principle—?"

"During the unprecedented release of atomic energy that arose during the simultaneous bombings of our cities, something happened to the very time continuum in which we exist—a crook, a twist, a fold—explain it how you will. I accidentally stumbled upon an electronic circuit that would enable passage from one folded section to the adjacent section. The fold proved to be about fifteen years in length, so that I found it possible to pass from the time shortly after the destruction to this period."

Disbelief struggled with memory in Grandin's face. "Why these?" he said at last, holding up the cylinder.

Pete closed his eyes momentarily against some unknown well of pain. "Just suppose," he said, "that every living man could see the horror and feel the desolation and fear that you have seen and felt. Do you think men would allow it to happen if they could know the fear that you have known?"

"It would never happen," breathed Marcia fervently, "if every man could see that world of death."

Grandin felt suddenly cold in the blazing radiance of the sun. He looked into Pete's eyes, saw there the searching intensity of a dream to turn aside the course of the world.

"That is my hope and my dream," said Pete slowly. "I built these—" He indicated the cylinder again. "They can be attached to any vehicle. When the vehicle moves across the line where the fold of the time continuum appears, a shift to the future occurs, or vice versa. I have developed an improved ignition system for cars, and an improved carburettion method. In both of these devices is incorporated the time-changer. I supposed that it might be possible to sell some such device to the car manufacturers, distribute others through garages, filling stations, and so on. Eventually, millions of cars would be so equipped. Near every city they would be driven through the time-fold, and their occupants would witness the ruin their own folly was to bring.

"Only once would the vision be experienced. The time-changer is built to be self-destructive on passing back to this side of the fold. But in the mind of every man who saw that vision would burn the reality of the horror to come. I hoped that I might recruit agents in every country to help in the distribution of these devices.

"It's a gigantic task, one that might occupy the life-time of a healthy man. I'm given no more than a single year to live, and the pain is too great to work more than a few hours in a day. There is no one to carry on my work. You can imagine what would happen if I tried to get the scientists of this period to listen to me. They'd laugh at me as a crazy, deluded man, even if I showed them the time-changer."

As Pete spoke, he watched the reaction in Grandin's eyes. "And you do not believe me, either," he said sadly. "I've never told anyone else this story. I thought perhaps you would . . . I just thought you might—"

Very suddenly he stopped talking as his eyes looked distantly down the road. A battered vehicle as decrepit as his own was shambling up the highway. As it approached the garage it turned into the driveway leading to Pete's.

Grandin's eyes widened and changed as if a spectre had loomed in the air before him. And then dawning belief in the unbelievable and the unreal spread over his face.

The woman Delsa and the two men who had appeared with her in the ruins were emerging from the car.

Pete, watching Grandin's amazed countenance, said softly, "The necessity for my trip has ended. Won't you all come in where we can talk?"

He introduced the newcomers, including Delsa, who was his wife. Her eyes were still upon Jack, and there was eagerness and an unnatural hope burning there. The two men were Dr. Bradburn and Carl Simons, an assistant physicist who had helped Pete in his electronic work.

Delsa said, " It's my fault they came back, Pete. But I was so sure . . . and when I thought of him escaping—"

Pete silenced her with a touch of his hand. " It's all right now, darling. They understand now. I'm sure you do, don't you? " He addressed Grandin and Marcia. " You know the shock you experienced merely passing into that dead city. Perhaps you can understand the shock that my wife—all of us—have known by living through those events and in that environment."

Grandin nodded absently. His mind had leapt ahead to the inevitable conclusions of Pete's story. With man's doom so calculable, his purposeless existence had become purposeful and reasonable. All he had done up to now had contributed to the certainty of man's annihilation. To attempt to swerve man from that course would be his work from now on.

These were the thoughts that he expressed when they were gathered that evening in Pete's living quarters. Dr. Bradburn nodded approvingly. " None of us who has survived the explosions has more than a year to a year and a half to live. Pete has less than any of us. The best he can hope for is to pass his dream into hands that may be able to carry on the work. That is why he has searched so hard for someone who could understand and complete it."

Marcia said, " I'm terribly sorry we misunderstood you and ran away. But it was such a shock. And what did you mean, Delsa, when you kept speaking of Jack with such emphasis? "

For a moment Delsa's eyes reflected panic. She glanced at Pete. " It was nothing," she said hastily. " Just a fantastic notion that Jack was a certain someone Pete had hoped to find. You'll have to forgive my actions, for the shock of our experiences has been almost too much for me."

As if suddenly coming out of a deep trance, Pete began to speak. His eyes were far-seeing and staring. " Fear," he said, " only fear will control man's insatiable lusts. Let every man and woman see the ruin and horror to come. Let it burn in the brain of every magistrate and governor of states and nations. Let it haunt the dreams of every minister of state. Only then will men and their rulers begin to work for eternal peace. Only then will they learn that men, not things, are of chief importance to man. And perhaps it is a forlorn hope, after all—"

To Jack, listening to this talk of the destiny of man and nations, it seemed as if years had passed since dawn. He'd foreseen a life for himself filled with the excitement of discovery and a thousand skills and inventions of his own hands. Now he knew that his mission was aligned with that of his father for as long as he should live.

When the talk lulled he found his way out into the darkness under the desert stars, and he stood watching them. How long he had been there he did not know, when he heard the sound of a footstep.

He whirled round. He recognized the shambling steps of Pete. His first impulse was of fear, for the physical form of the scientist was fearful in the night by the light of the stars and the cloud-swept moon.

"Jack—?" Pete's voice was hesitant.

"Yes?"

"Will you sit down with me—here on the ground?" Without waiting for answer, Pete slumped to a sitting position with his back against the side of the garage which was filled with his sign. Jack came down beside him.

"'PETE CAN FIX IT.' Remember those signs along the highway?"

"Yes," said Jack. "We followed them all the way from Wickenburg. We wondered who this Pete was."

"I've often wondered, too. You see, when I was a boy just about your age I came along this highway with my parents. We were going on a holiday somewhere, but all I can remember is that string of signs, Pete Can Fix It. That's the only thing I have left of the world before the bombs came. Just that and my scientific knowledge and skill. After the bombing I never knew who I was, not even my name. I remembered no friends or anything that I had been—only that crazy sign, Pete Can Fix It, and those few long-ago days when I came down this highway as a boy. But even the faces of the parents who brought me along here are gone from me.

"I came back to this abandoned garage. I thought it might help bring back the memories and help find someone I once knew—Tell me about yourself, Jack. The things you've done, the things you hope to do."

"Nothing much has happened to me," said Jack. "I've never known what I really wanted to do—until now. I went to school at Meredith. That's near Elkins, but I guess you wouldn't know about that. We have a place there where I can have a horse. He's called Baldy, and we're good pals, but he was kind of wild at first."

Pete's voice caught. " And he threw you—"

" Yes, when I first got him Pop warned me not to ride him until I'd had some training and Baldy had grown used to me. But I was so anxious that I got him out one day and rode him anyway. He threw me and my foot caught in a stirrup. He dragged me over some barbed wire, which ripped my chest."

" Yes," Pete whispered suddenly, fiercely, his eyes on the stars overhead. " And you struggled to the house and tried to tell the folks that you fell off the barn because you thought they'd take the horse away from you."

" That's right—but how did you know? " Jack turned and looked into Pete's eyes in momentary fear.

" I remember now—all of it. Baldy, the old barn, and the porch steps that creaked— Look! "

Pete suddenly opened his shirt, and the moon soared into full brilliance with a shining crescendo of light that struck the jagged, livid scar running across his chest. Jack stared at it a moment, then gasped in horror. He recognized the fish-hook shape in the centre of his chest.

" You went up to your room alone and prayed that night that Baldy wouldn't be taken away—"

" Don't! " Jack cried out.

" Don't be afraid," said Pete softly. " You see now why I came back to this road, why I had to find you. You have to know and understand. No one else can carry on my work as you can. Not even—your father. Within two or three months I'll be utterly useless. In a year I'll be dead. Learn from . . . your father . . . learn all the science and technique that you can cram into your head. Develop the skill of your hands. Do your best. I've tried to do mine."

Mercifully, the moon's light was hidden for an instant while Jack's eyes fought back the stinging and his young spirit wrestled with the sudden weight that was hardly bearable to it. Then after a moment he said quietly, " I'll do the best I can."

There was a step round the corner of the building, and they recognized the silhouette of Grandin.

" Let's . . . just not tell them, shall we? " said Pete. " It will be easier on . . . your father and mother if they don't know." He glanced down at the repulsive flesh that was himself.

In the darkness Jack swallowed hard and choked back the surging in his throat. He extended a hand. " Yes, that's best. We won't tell them."

Slowly Pete moved away to enter the building. Grandin came up. " We wondered what had happened, Jack. What were you doing out here? "

"Pete and I were just talking. I'm ready to come in now."

As they moved away from the wall, Jack glanced back at the enormous letters: PETE'S. And at the smaller, defiant boast: PETE CAN FIX IT.

"You know—" Jack said suddenly, his voice becoming steady and confident as he stepped forward to match his father's stride, "you know, somehow I think that maybe Pete *can* fix it."

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ANSWERS to TOM, DICK AND HARRY

on page 32

1. *Tom Brown, in "Tom Brown's Schooldays," by Thomas Hughes.*
2. *Richard Hannay, in "The Thirty-Nine Steps," by John Buchan.*
3. *Henry King, in "Cautionary Tales," by Hilaire Belloc.*
4. *Tom Sawyer, in the novel of that title, by Mark Twain.*
5. *Moby Dick, in the novel of that title, by Herman Melville.*
6. *Sir Henry Baskerville, in "The Hound of the Baskervilles," by A. Conan Doyle.*
7. *Tom Bowling, in Charles Dibdin's ballad, "Poor Tom, or the Sailor's Epitaph."*
8. *Dick Swiveller, in "The Old Curiosity Shop," by Charles Dickens.*
9. *Dr. Henry Jekyll, in "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," by Robert Louis Stevenson.*

★ ★ ★

FIELD WORK

After we settled at the Cearne, Edward (my father) spent two days in London every week but did his principal work of reading manuscripts in the country, preferably out of doors. While he was at Froghole one of these manuscripts was missed in the autumn.

The following summer an ancient rustic came over to Cearne with a roll of manuscript which he had discovered with the point of his scythe when mowing the Froghole orchard. My father promptly rejected it for publication, and it was returned to its author, very little damaged by a winter in the open.

DAVID GARNETT, *The Golden Echo*

★ *"What's cooking?" In this entertaining extract from "The House that Nino Built," the author conducts a culinary counter-attack, ably assisted by his imperious young daughter, "the Duchess," and his son, Albertino.*

THE BIRTHDAY CAKE

by GIOVANNI GUARESCHI

THE maid asked if she could go to bed.

"Go right away," Margherita told her. "Almost everything's ready."

"What about the cake and the candles?" the Duchess asked. "I want it to be pretty for my friends."

"It will be quite up to specifications," I told her. "I'm going to town early tomorrow morning to buy it."

"You don't have to do that," said Margherita. "I'm going to bake a cake."

It was a serious matter, and the Duchess and Albertino both looked at me in bewilderment.

"Margherita, I don't see any need for your taking so much trouble. You've done too much as it is."

Margherita shook her head. "It's a mother's duty to make her children's birthday cakes with her own fair hands," she insisted. Her voice had a very decided note, and both children turned pale.

"If you work too hard over it and then get a headache, you'll make me feel very sorry," said the Duchess.

"I won't complain. A mother must know how to suffer in silence. As soon as we've had our after-dinner coffee, you must go to bed, and I'll start the cake."

"Are you making an angel cake?" Albertino asked cautiously.

"More likely a double-dyed devil-food cake, if you ask me," muttered the Duchess darkly, as she got up from the table.

"Be quiet!" shouted her mother.

"It's always the same way," the Duchess complained. "When it's my birthday, I always get cheated. You bought a cake for Albertino, didn't you?"

"Well, yours is going to be home-made! And you ought to be ashamed to show so little appreciation of my thoughtfulness."

"I'm not eating your thoughtfulness; I'm eating the cake!" the Duchess shot over her shoulder.

Albertino followed her, without saying a word, but he gave

me an anxious look as he went by. Margherita finished her cigarette and got up from her chair.

" I have a recipe for a very special cake," she said. " A cake as soft as cotton wool and without any of the grease in it that makes most cakes so indigestible. Just eggs, sugar, flour, and a pinch of baking-soda."

In order to make the cake really digestible, Margherita should have left out the eggs, sugar, flour, and baking-soda. But I restrained myself and simply asked her what I could do to help.

" Just light the fire and bring the oven up to the proper heat. But first, measure the sugar and flour. You'll find the amounts on this paper."

I measured them carefully, then lit a fire in the stove, and watched Margherita. She has an unhesitating and decisive way of doing things, and anyone who has never tasted her cakes would say she has a natural gift for baking. It's not that Margherita's cakes are bad. They're simply horrible. This is because she bakes just the way she reasons, pursuing a logic all her own and arriving at the most logically illogical conclusion you can imagine.

Eggs, flour, sugar. Margherita will start off with the idea of following a recipe and beat the sugar and eggs together. But then she can't resist thinning the mixture with a few drops of sherry. At that point, it's too thin, and she adds some grated lady-fingers to thicken it and passes it through a vegetable strainer.

Margherita worked vigorously for three-quarters of an hour before she handed me a pan filled to the brim with a pale yellow compound and proceeded to give me further instructions.

" Put it in the oven, and check on it every now and then with a toothpick. When you can stick the toothpick in and pull it out again perfectly dry, then it's time to remove it from the oven and let it cool. With a little whipped cream and imagination you can decorate the top; then arrange the candles and put it in the refrigerator."

She went calmly to bed and I sat down near the oven to keep watch over the cake. Every now and then I opened the door and stuck in a toothpick. The cake remained inert for some time, gradually taking on a golden-brown colour. Then, thanks to the baking-soda, it began to rise very rapidly until it touched the top of the oven. After that, it slowly went back to normal, only instead of stopping at the edge of the pan, where it had begun, it sank lower and lower.

The toothpick broke when I stuck it in, because a hard crust

had formed on the outside. I stuck in a nail, which came out sticky, so I closed the oven door again.

Just then the Duchess and Albertino appeared in their night-clothes at the door.

" How's it going? " the Duchess asked.

" It's baking," I answered.

" What does it look like? " asked Albertino.

" I can't say. It hasn't yet taken its definitive shape."

We waited for ten minutes and then peered in. The cake had sunk lower still, and the nail could hardly penetrate the outer shell. But this time it came out perfectly dry. The cake was done. I took out the pan and set it on the kitchen table.

" It looks like congealed scrambled eggs," Albertino observed cautiously.

The Duchess tried to pierce it with the nail, but in vain.

" You'll need a drill to put in the candles," she mumbled.

" They can always be stuck on top with rubber cement," said Albertino.

" I don't think any of that will be necessary," I told them. " Once it's been decorated with whipped cream, it will look very handsome, and the candles will go on without any trouble."

We put the cake in the refrigerator and very soon it was cool. Then we took it out and turned the pan upside-down over the kitchen table. The cake detached itself from the pan and fell with a wooden sound. It looked like a sort of hard, yellow bun, about one inch high, but with a little fingering it stretched to something like its former height, for it possessed considerable elasticity.

We stared in silence at what was supposed to be the softest and most digestible birthday cake in the world.

" Poor Mother! " the Duchess said with a sigh, and tears came into her eyes.

" There's no use dramatizing the situation," I said. " Let's stage a counter-attack right away. And remember we're fighting not for a mere cake, but for your mother's honour as well! "

I put the cake back in the oven and let it bake until it was dry as a biscuit. Then, forced it through the meat-grinder and mixed the resultant powder with some sweet dessert wine. The result was a most unpromising soupy mixture. I added flour, sugar, and eggs, which yielded me a paste, but one that remained gritty even after I had rolled it out on the board, because the powder had brought lumps with it through the grinder.

" We might make a sort of puff paste and press it with the electric iron," the Red Duchess suggested.

This gave me a brilliant idea. I cut my present mixture of

dough into pieces and put them through the machine for making spaghetti. It emerged from this in flat strips, which I rolled up together into a compact and homogeneous block. But it was very hard, and the Red Duchess observed: "If we bake it that way, it will be like a brick."

"And it can't rise, either," added Albertino.

"That's right!" I admitted. "The dough has been unnerved by the brutal treatment it got in the machine, and we must revive it."

We dried the block in the oven and then grated it. Then we added more sweet wine, milk, and yeast, and kneaded it into a comparatively soft substance. After that, we buttered the pan, poured in the new mixture, and put it in the oven. When the cake seemed to be baked we took the pan out of the oven and let it cool.

Then we removed the cover and used a pair of scissors to trim the dough that had worked its way into the gap between the cover and the pan.

"We should have soldered it with a blow-torch," the Red Duchess observed.

The cake was cooked, all right, but it was a sad sight, because the top layer had stuck to the cover.

"This is where the iron comes in," said the Red Duchess, who is a woman that always sticks to her guns.

I elaborated on her idea by sprinkling chestnut flour over the surface to fill in the holes. Then I ran the iron over it and obtained a uniform, shiny crust.

On top of this we sprinkled confectioner's sugar. Then we removed the cake from the pan.

It wasn't quite as soft as it should have been, but at this point nothing could daunt us. Albertino took the spray from my drawing-table and we watered it with white wine. Whipped cream, nuts, ground sugared almonds, and candied fruit went on next as decoration.

Three experienced pastry-cooks, such as the Duchess, Albertino, and myself, could hardly help creating a masterpiece, from a decorative point of view. We stuck in the nine candles and consigned the cake to the refrigerator.

Dawn was at hand, and weariness weighed down our shoulders. But Margherita's honour had been saved.

Towards the end of dinner the cake was brought to the table and scored an enormous success. But when each one of us had a slice on the plate before him, we looked at one another in some perplexity. Who was going to take the first bite? The brave

and generous Duchess was ready to immolate herself and swallowed a big mouthful.

"It's perfectly wonderful!" she exclaimed.

It was indeed a wonderful cake, and Margherita received all sorts of compliments about it.

"Just a routine matter," she responded indifferently. "I can do much better."

★ ★ ★

ARGOSY PRIZE CROSSWORD

PRIZE-WINNERS OF CROSSWORD NO. 9

We are pleased to announce the three winners of Argosy's ninth Prize Crossword Competition :—

Lieutenant J. Melvin, *H.M.S. Zenith*, Harwich, Essex.

Miss Norah D. McWillie, Bon Accord Terrace, Aberdeen.

W. H. Smith, Esq., Weston Street, Bolton, Lancs.

These readers, who sent in the first correct solutions to be checked on the closing date, each receive a one-guinea book token.

SOLUTION

Across. 1, *Anchor*. 4, *Imperial*. 9, *Nonpareil*. 11, *Billy*. 12, *Young*. 13, *Iced water*. 14, *Needles*. 16, *Slot*. 19, *Amok*. 21, *Pumpkin*. 24, *Eagle-eyed*. 25, *Caper*. 26, *Patti*. 27, *Oiled silk*. 28, *Resigned*. 29, *Origin*.

Down. 1, *Annoying*. 2, *Conjurer*. 3, *Orang*. 5, *Mullets*. 6, *Elbow-room*. 7, *Inlets*. 8, *Layers*. 10, *Evils*. 15, *Lumbering*. 17, *Skipping*. 18, *Unbroken*. 20, *Keynote*. 21, *Pedal*. 22, *Pepper*. 23, *Agates*. 25, *Cedar*.

PRIZE CROSSWORD NO. 12.

Argosy's twelfth Prize Crossword Competition appears on page 144. There will be one-guinea book tokens for the first three correct solutions checked on the closing date. Entries should be completed *in ink*, and posted to:

ARGOSY PRIZE CROSSWORD (No. 12),
3 Pilgrim Street, London, E.C.4 (Comp.)

to arrive by Thursday, May 6th, the closing date.

We regret that entry must be limited to readers living in Great Britain, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and Eire. There is no entry fee and the Editor's decision is final.

Names of the prize-winners in this competition and the solution will appear in the issue of Argosy on sale July 9th.

WATER MUSIC

**"Tirra lirra," by the river
Sang Sir Lancelot**

ALFRED TENNYSON,
The Lady of Shalott

Far have I travelled in the lands where the wild barley
The wild corn,
And the wild briar the colour of fire
Bedizen the desert wells. There the light bubbles early,
Bells like spring water the sky filling;
Strangely I heard them babble, water and bells,
In the waste, in the desert, far in the desert forlorn,
Water like music, music like water welling.

DOROTHY WELLESLEY, *Desert Wells*

Raindrop Prelude

Meanwhile a storm was coming on with the approach of evening. It had been stiflingly hot since midday and there had been rumblings in the distance; but now a broad storm-cloud, which had long lain like a leaden shroud on the very rim of the horizon, began to grow and appear above the tree-tops; the sultry air began quivering more perceptibly, more and more violently troubled by the approaching storm; a wind sprang up, rustled abruptly among the leaves, sank into silence, again set up a prolonged rustling and howled among the trees; a gloomy darkness moved rapidly over the land, driving before it the last glow of sunset; dense clouds, as though suddenly released, floated upwards and flew across the sky; there came a spatter of rain, a red flash of lightning and a heavy, angry roll of thunder.

"Let us go in," said old Ipatov, "or we may get wet."

Everyone got up.

"In a minute," cried Veretyev. "Let us have the last song. Listen: *Oh, my porch, oh, my new porch.*"

He sang in a loud voice, rapidly striking the chords with the whole of his hand. "*My porch of maple.*" The chorus took it up as though carried away by the tune. Almost at the same instant the rain came lashing down in streams; but Veretyev sang "My porch" to the end.

Drowned from time to time by peals of thunder, the gay reckless song sounded even gayer and more reckless to the

accompaniment of the noisy patter and gurgling of the rain. Finally the last outburst of the chorus rang out and the whole company ran, laughing, into the drawing-room.

IVAN TURGENEV, *A Quiet Backwater*,
translated by CONSTANCE GARNETT

Instrumental

They have no song, the sedges dry,
And still they sing.
It is within my breast they sing,
As I pass by.
Within my breast they touch a string,
They wake a sigh.
There is but sound of sedges dry;
In me they sing.

GEORGE MEREDITH, 1828-1909,
Song in the Songless

Barcarole

That afternoon the gondola and sandolo were lashed together side by side. Two sails were raised, and in this lazy fashion we stole homewards, faster or slower according as the breeze freshened or slackened, landing now and then on islands, sauntering along the sea walls which bulwark Venice from the Adriatic, and singing—those at least of us who had the power to sing. Four of our Venetians had trained voices and memories of inexhaustible music. Over the level water, with the ripple plashing at our keel, their songs went abroad, and mingled with the failing day. The barcaroles and serenades peculiar to Venice were, of course, in harmony with the occasion . . .

The sun sank, not splendidly, but quietly in banks of clouds above the Alps. Stars came out, uncertainly at first, and then in strength, reflected on the sea . . . The city grew before us. Stealing into Venice in that calm—stealing silently and shadow-like, with scarce a ruffle of the water, the masses of the town emerging out of darkness into twilight, till San Giorgio's gun boomed with a flash athwart our stern, and the gas-lamps of the Piazzetta swam into sight; all this was like a long enchanted chapter of romance. And now the music of our men had sunk to one faint whistling from Eustace of tunes in harmony with whispers at the prow.

JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS, 1840–93,
A Venetian Medley

Duet

Another large Limerick family owned a beautiful house named "Roselawn," the garden sloping down to the banks of the Shannon. There was famous salmon fishing in these waters, and boat-loads of boys and girls would take the water armed with fishing tackle and musical instruments. Two of the sisters of this more prosperous family had splendid voices and were known for their beauty as the "Red Rose" and the "White Rose" of Limerick. While their brothers and friends plied their rods, the "Roses" sang arias from Handel to the salmon. On one occasion the "White Rose," being asked to hold a rod for her brother while he attended to another, received a shock. Her mind was far away in the clouds with her adored Handel, and when a fish took her fly she flung the rod with horror into the stream. The music remained in abeyance for some stormy moments, while the furious brother rowed frantically to recover his rod and salmon.

DOROTHY MCCALL, *When That I Was*

Ballad

Aft hae I roved by bonnie Doon
To see the woodbine twine,
And ilka bird sang o' its love;
And sae did I o' mine.

ROBERT BURNS

Nocturne

The sun sank, and the level light flooded the fields and the river. Now the landscape lost its bright pure definitions of outline, its look as of a picture embroidered in brilliant silks, and veiled its colours with a uniform pearl-like glow. A chill fell and the scent of may grew troubling in the stillness. They turned the canoe towards home.

Nearer the town, boats became more frequent. Gramophones clamoured from the bowels of most of them; and they were heavily charged with grey-flannelled youth. Jennifer, observing them with frank interest, pointed out the good-looking ones in a loud whisper; and all of them stared, stared as they passed.

Above the quiet secretly-stirring town, roofs, towers and spires floated in a pale gold wash of light. What was the mystery of Cambridge in the evening? Footfalls struck with a pang on the heart, faces startled with strange beauty, and every far appearing or disappearing form seemed significant.

ROSAMOND LEHMANN, *Dusty Answer*

FRONT PAGE STORY

They were looking for the murderer across the Rio Grande

by BRETT HALLIDAY

YOU want a human interest story for your paper on the execution tomorrow? A guy is scheduled for a one-way trip to hell in the electric chair, and all you see in it is a front page story!

You're right. There is a whale of a story that hasn't been told. I guess it's what you'd call human interest stuff, all right.

I've kept my mouth shut up to now for Sam's sake, but he won't mind after the current is turned on in that little grey room.

I'm the only person that can give you the real low-down. Me, and one other. But the other fellow isn't going to talk for publication.

All right, if you promise to hold it until after they switch on tomorrow morning. I wouldn't want Sam to be angry with me for spilling it.

There's a gap of five weeks unaccounted for from the time Bully Bronson's murderer crossed the Rio Grande going south until he came back to fry in the hot chair. A lot of living can be packed into five weeks. A hell of a lot. It's funny the way things happened to bring Sam and me together. It doesn't make a lot of sense, but things don't—south of the border.

I drifted into the railroad construction camp that morning, needing a job, and not caring what kind.

The American engineer, Hobbs, was down with tropical dysentery and was all set for a trip back to a hospital in the States. He had a young assistant he'd planned to leave in charge of the work, but the youngster was new to Mexico and just the night before I hit camp he had gone off and drunk enough tequila to make the mistake of insulting a Mexican girl. The girl's father drained the cactus juice from his belly and left him in bad shape to take charge of a construction job.

With his fever at 105, Hobbs was in a tight spot when I happened along. They were filling the last gap in a railroad line that was to connect St. Louis with the west coast of Mexico and with the Orient by ship, and the rainy season was due in six weeks.

That meant the track had to be laid and the culverts in place within six weeks—or else. The last gap was across that valley south of Terlingua, where plenty of water runs down from the mountains during the rainy season.

And there was more to it than just beating the rainy season. The history of the St. Louis, Mexico & Asiatic Railroad goes back years to a group of men in St. Louis who dreamt of a direct route from their city to the Orient.

They backed their dream with money and started building the S.L.M. & A. from both ends towards the middle. Something happened—they ran out of money, I guess—and got the American end to within a hundred miles of the border, and the Mexican end about two hundred miles south of the border. For forty years the line was in the receiver's hands, and that three-hundred-mile gap was the difference between a dream and reality. Just last year, they got money from somewhere and started filling that gap.

It was narrowed to four miles, and you can't blame Hobbs for jumping at any chance to get finished before the rainy season came along and held them up another six months.

That's just what he did. He asked me a couple of questions to see if I knew my stuff, then put me in charge.

They took him north in an ambulance at noon, and his assistant died at four o'clock—the Mexican knife having drained more from his belly than just the overdose of tequila.

That meant it was entirely up to me. A job I hadn't been formally introduced to, an all-Mexican crew of two hundred navvies, a four-mile stretch of line, with drainage culverts, to get in place—and the rainy season to beat.

I sat up all night in Hobbs's tent with a storm lantern hanging from the ridge-pole, going over the blueprints and field books.

We started shifting earth in the morning, and I tried to be everywhere on the job at once.

Mexicans are funny. I'd rather work a job with Mexican labour than any other kind, but they do need bossing. The one thing they haven't got is initiative. They'll do anything they're told, and do it well, but they have to be told or they won't do a damn thing.

I was going crazy before the morning was half over. I had a theodolite set in the middle of the gap, and a level at each end of the track that we were working both ways. Running from one instrument to another; setting a few curve stations with the theodolite; trotting back to drop in some posts at one end; then going back to the other end to reset slope stakes that had been dragged out—it was driving me mad. There were two hundred

men in the teams moving earth all the time, you understand, and I had to keep them moving.

I was standing behind a level, cursing my Mexican rodman who was holding the level rod upside down on a stake, when I heard an American voice behind me: " You wouldn't be needing a spare engineer, Mister? "

A million dollars wouldn't have sounded as good to me just then. I pushed back my hat and wiped a muddy mixture of sweat and dust from my forehead. The man was sitting a roan mare, looking down at me. He wore white whipcords and a white shirt, but he looked at home in the Texas saddle.

His eyes were blue and there was a flame in them. He didn't blink while I stood there and stared. He was about thirty, and there was red sunburn on his face like a man gets when he comes fresh into the blistering heat south of the Rio Grande.

I couldn't quite make him out, but I only asked one question: " Can you take a level? "

He stepped off the roan onto the soft earth of the track and came towards me. There was a bulge under his shirt on the left side. I've seen enough shoulder holsters to know what it was.

The way he stepped up to the level, squinted through the telescope, and adjusted the focus to his eye was all the answer my question needed. You can tell by the way a man walks up to a tripod whether he knows his stuff or not. It's a trick of seeing the position of the three legs and not stepping close enough to any one of them to throw the instrument out of level.

He didn't know the Mexican lingo, but you can set grade stakes with arm signals. I gave him the field book showing grade elevations for each station and told him to go to it.

I asked him his name as I started to the other end of the gap. He gave me a steady look and said, " Just call me Sam." That was all right with me. I would have called him sweetheart if he'd wanted it that way. I was so damned glad to get some help.

I took three deep breaths and moved on down the job. Things began to take shape when I had time to study the blueprints and get around. With Sam handling one instrument, I felt the job was whipped.

By quitting time that night, everything was going smoothly. I could see it could be finished in six weeks if Sam stayed with me.

I told him so after a meal of frijoles con chile and tortillas that the Mexican cook dished up. We were sitting together in the tent, and Sam nodded. He didn't say anything. He was tired, and the sunburn on his face had deepened to a fiery red. He slouched back on his bunk and seemed busy with private thoughts.

I got up and fiddled with the radio, a battery set that Hobbs had left behind. I got it working, and tuned in to a news broadcast. The announcer's voice crackled in the quiet that had fallen over the camp in the twilight.

" The search for the slayer of Bully Bronson shifts below the Mexican border tonight. Authorities are convinced that Bronson's assistant engineer, who murdered his chief in cold blood after an argument in a highway construction camp, has slipped through a cordon of officers in the Big Bend section and made his escape across the Rio Grande. This station has been requested by police to broadcast the following description to Mexican authorities who are warned that . . ."

I reached over and snapped the radio off. Sam was sitting up straight, watching me through slitted eyes. Three buttons of his shirt were open and his right arm was crooked at the elbow, so that his gun-hand could go inside his shirt in a hurry.

I said, " Everybody in this part of the country knows Bully Bronson needed killing. I hope they never get the guy that did it."

Sam relaxed a little. He reached in his shirt-pocket for a cigarette, drew out an empty pack. I tossed him my baccy and brown papers. He tore two papers and spilled a lot of tobacco before he got a bulging cigarette rolled and licked.

When he had it alight, he said, " But murder is still murder." He clenched his teeth together, as though he was having a hard time to keep from saying too much.

" It's not murder when a swine like Bully Bronson gets bumped off," I argued. " I know fifty men that'll sleep easier tonight because Bronson is dead."

" It's murder when a man waits until another is asleep, then blows the top of his head off with a shotgun." Sam's voice was thin and shaky.

" There's a lot of things that go into a killing like that," I told him. " No one will ever know how much the killer had had to take from Bronson before he screwed up enough courage to do the job. And from what I know of Bronson, it was clever to wait until the old devil was asleep, and then use a shotgun to make sure of doing a good job."

" The law still calls it first-degree murder."

I nodded. I was watching his face. " If the law ever gets a chance to say anything about it. If he's across the river, he doesn't have to worry."

" There's such a thing as extradition."

I laughed. " You don't know this country as well as I do. Extradition is just a big word south of the Rio Grande. What a

man has done back in the States doesn't count against him down here. A man leaves his past behind him when he crosses the river."

Sam thought that over, dragging on his brown-paper cigarette. His lips twisted and he asked: "Can a man ever get away from his past?"

I stood up and yawned. I knew something was going to crack if we kept on along that line.

I said, "Hard work is the best medicine for that kind of thinking. We've got a tough job in front of us here. It's going to take all both of us can do, working together, to get through."

I turned my back on him to give him time to think it over and get my meaning straight.

There was just enough daylight left to see the end of the trackway we were laying for the railroad there in front of camp.

It's an ugly, hard country south of the Big Bend. Nothing will grow in the hot sand except mesquite and cactus, and the only things that can live are lizards and long-eared jack-rabbits. You forget how ugly it is in the darkness. Even the bare thorny mesquite and the spiny cactus plants look friendly.

I remember every little thing as I stood there in the open doorway of the tent waiting for Sam to say something. A mule squealed in the corrals, and some of the Mexicans were singing to a guitar accompaniment.

Sam's voice was harsh, close to my ear. "The job isn't my look-out."

I pulled a lot of the cool evening air into my lungs. I knew this was the showdown. I had to make Sam see it my way.

"It's my look-out, Sam. I didn't ask for it, but here it is, dumped in my lap. It's up to us to get the track completed before water starts running down from the hills and washes it out."

He leaned against the upright supporting pole and looked out over the valley. I nodded. "It's our job, Sam."

There was a twisted funny look on his face. "Engineers are damned fools."

I agreed with him. "They just wouldn't be engineers if they weren't. They'd be clerks or shoe salesmen."

He laughed, and I know he was thinking about a murdered man across the river. "Men die and other men run away from the electric chair, but there's always a job to think about."

I turned back into the tent. I knew Sam was going to see me through. I said, "After we get ready for the track-laying crew will be time enough to talk about other things."

He nodded, came back, and sat on his bunk. The twisted look was gone from his face. " I suppose it might help a man to get one more job under his belt."

He took off his shirt, showing a shoulder harness with a .45 automatic in a clip holster. Neither of us said anything as he unbuckled the harness and hung it over the head of his bunk. It stayed there until the job was finished.

It wasn't tough, as such jobs go. The usual run of luck on construction work. Rock where you don't expect to find it, and so much sand in the track that it wouldn't hold a two-to-one slope. Too much sotol in camp on pay-nights, grudges settled the Mexican way, with knives, which left us short-handed until we could get more teams.

Sam was a good worker. He didn't have an awful lot of experience, but he was built of the stuff that makes engineers.

Lots of nights, those first two weeks, we stayed until twelve or later under the hot glare of a lantern, working on mass diagrams, changing gradients.

Never a word between us about the search for Bully Bronson's murderer—and the radio stayed turned off.

Your mind gets numbed after so long on a rush job that takes everything you've got. There aren't any tomorrows and the yesterdays don't count.

There's only the present—with the heat and the dust, swarms of sand-flies, the shouts of navvies getting their loads up the hill; a thick haze rising from the valley, with snow-capped mountain peaks showing dimly through it from the south-west, the two ends of a narrow railroad track creeping towards each other so slowly that you'd swear you were making no progress at all, if you didn't have station stakes to prove it to you.

Two white men on a job like that are bound to get pretty close, or learn to hate each other's guts. During those weeks Sam and I got about as close as two men can ever get. Without words, you understand. Neither of us was the kind to talk.

I gave up being the boss after the first couple of days. We were just two engineers pushing a job through.

I didn't waste any time thinking about what would come after it was done. I don't think Sam did, either. The job was the only thing that counted.

No. I suppose you don't understand. You're a newspaper reporter. You've spent a lot of years practising to get cynical. A job, to you, means something to work at eight hours a day and then forget while you go out sporting.

You asked for human interest stuff. I'm giving it to you even if you don't recognize it.

Five weeks dropped out of the lives of two men while time stood still and a construction job went on. When I tell you how it ended: You're going to say it doesn't make sense and that men don't act that way. Maybe it won't make sense to you. Maybe your readers won't believe it.

But it did happen just as I'm telling you.

By the end of three weeks I'd forgotten what I'd guessed was his reason for crossing the border in a hurry. His automatic still hung at the head of his bunk, and neither of us had mentioned Bronson's murderer since that first night.

But you can't get away from a thing like that. It was with us all the time. Sam was right when he said a man can't leave a thing like murder behind him just by crossing a muddy stream of water. That's why I got a prickly feeling up my spine one afternoon when I saw two riders pushing up a little cloud of dust in the valley between us and the river.

There was that submerged sense of fear that had been riding me all the time. The feeling that our luck couldn't possibly hold, that there was bound to be a showdown.

I was running the last bit of centre-line with the theodolite. Sam was on the far end of the track, staking out a drainage culvert. I swung the telescope on the riders half a mile away, and it brought them right up to me.

I knew I had guessed right. They spelt trouble. Slouching in the saddle, wearing dust-stained clothing with cartridge belts slanting across their middles, they headed towards camp. I knew I had to keep them away from Sam if the job was going to get finished.

I left the theodolite and walked back to the camp. The two riders were pulling in close when I stepped inside our tent. One was a heavy man with a grey moustache. The other was long and lanky, with a scar on his cheek. Both carried six-shooters in open holsters, and had saddle guns in boots slung beneath their right stirrup-leathers. Cow-country deputies, if I ever saw any.

They pulled up in front of the tent and yelled for the cook. When he came to the door, the heavy one said, "We heard across the river that you had a new gringo engineer here. Is that right?"

The cook was scared. He bobbed his head. "*Si, si, Señor. Es verdád.*"

The scar jumped up and down on the thin man's face. "Where is he? We've come to take him back."

I waited to hear what the cook would say. He'd seen me pass by on my way to the tent. But Sam was new on the job, too, and he might send them out to Sam.

He didn't. He pointed to the tent and told them I was inside.

I slid back and got Sam's automatic. It was cocked when I met them at the door. They didn't take time to get a good look at me. They saw the automatic and reached for their guns.

I was lucky. I shot one through the hand, and broke the other's shoulder. Then I called to the cook to bring some rope, and made him tie them up, while they cussed a blue streak and told me I couldn't do that to the Texas law. They were still cussing when I loaded them on their horses and took them to the nearest town, ten miles south. A ten-dollar bill is talking-money to a *pueblo* chief of police. They had a gaol that I hoped would hold together until the job was finished. I knew it would be at least that long before they could get a message across the river.

That's the whole truth about that affair—the first time it's been told. Sam didn't have a thing to do with it. He didn't even see the deputies. I told the cook to keep his mouth shut, and I told Sam the two shots were me plugging at a coyote. I don't think he believed me, but he didn't ask any questions.

I know the government kicked up a row over the gaoling of the two deputies in Mexico, but it happened just like I've told you. They were out of their own backyard, and they got what they were asking for when they crossed the border.

The job rocked along. No one else bothered us.

It's a funny country that way. People don't bother you much. There have been revolutions begun and ended without ever getting into the newspapers. The Mexicans have a queer way of strictly minding their own business.

That is, it'll seem queer to an American newspaper man. You make a living sticking your nose into other people's affairs and you wouldn't understand a Mexican's lack of curiosity. But that's the way they are. It was as though our construction camp was in a vacuum, and we slept and worked and ate in that vacuum with no contact with the outside world.

There was a feeling of tension between Sam and me as we began to see the end of the job coming up. We were going to finish a week ahead of schedule, but neither of us was any too happy about it.

When the last load was dumped in place on the track, it was going to mark more than just the end of another job.

I didn't know what Sam was thinking, looking at me queerly those last few days, as the two ends of the track came together,

and I didn't want to know. After that last load was dumped, there would be time enough to find out what Sam was thinking.

We were going on stolen time and we both knew it. But neither slowed up to make the job last longer. Not even for the extra week we might have taken before there was danger of rains.

It's something you can't do much about—the pressure to get right on with a job, when the end is in sight.

I knew Sam pretty well by that time, better than I've ever known another man, but his private thoughts still remained a secret to me. There's a certain barrier that you can't quite squeeze past. No matter how hard both of you try.

That's what I'm talking about.

There's a part of you that's *you*. Which is probably as close to a definition of the human soul as anyone will ever get. That's the difference between a man and an animal. You can pretty well guess what an animal will do in a given set of circumstances. Only God ever knows what a man is going to do!

Which pretty well brings us up to the morning Sam and I stood and looked at the completed railroad track. It was ten o'clock in the morning and the last yard of earth had been dumped and spread. Sam had been to the tent, and he carne back to see it ended with me. All at once, it was over. Teams were standing idle, and the Mexicans were squatting on their heels, sucking on cigarrillos.

The sun was searing down and there was a heat-haze hanging over the valley and everything was pretty much like it had been for weeks—except that our job was done. The track-laying crew would be coming along with cross-ties and steel. Trains would soon be running on schedule over the grade we had sweated out our guts on, and no one would think a damned thing about it. The job didn't seem so important after all.

I looked at Sam and I saw the same bulge inside his shirt that had been there when he first rode up on a roan mare. He had gone back to the tent to buckle on his .45.

That gave me an idea what to expect, but I still wasn't sure what he had on his mind. I said: "I don't know why it makes any difference, Sam, but I would have hated to quit before this was finished."

He said: "I know how you feel."

I didn't look at him when I said: "There's other jobs waiting to be done, south of here."

"I know. It's too bad we can't do them together."

"Can't we?" Hell, I was so choked up that's all I could trust myself to say.

Sam's voice was clearer, harder, than I had heard it before. "I'm afraid not. They're still looking for Bronson's murderer across the Rio Grande."

"Do we have to worry about that?"

"Haven't you known all along that it was *my* worry?"

I had, of course. There wasn't any use trying to lie to Sam.

My lips were parched. I wet them with a tongue that felt like a dry sponge. "What are you going to do, Sam?"

"I've got to go back across the border where I belong."

Well, there it was. Things had been building towards that ever since he stepped off the roan and took hold of the level. I had known it was coming all along. Sam was that kind of chap. Enough of an engineer to stay and see the job through, but too much of a man to take the easy way and go on down into the tropics with me, where they don't give a damn how many men you've murdered.

I said, "I'm ready whenever you are. It's been grand knowing you." And we shook hands.

There is your human interest yarn. You know the rest of it. The newspapers gave the story a lot of space when we crossed the border together. There were headlines about the lone American who had gone into Mexico, and brought out Bronson's murderer single-handed. The feature writers did a good deal of guessing about what happened during those five weeks.

Your paper will be the first to carry the straight story.

Am I angry with Sam? No. Not even when I sit down in that chair tomorrow to pay the price for killing Bronson. You see, I know how Sam felt about finishing *his* job. They picked him to go after me because he'd studied engineering in college.

But his real job was with the Texas Rangers.

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MAY MORNING

Let us leave bed and sleep today;
for us the crimson-fronted Dawn's
already risen. Now that the sky
is gay in the gracious month of May,
Sweetheart, let us love; let us
delight our warm desire, for in
this world they who do not seize it
have no pleasure.

JEAN PASSERAT, 1534–1602,
translated by RICHARD ALDINGTON

CAST THE FIRST SHADOW

He felt a sudden pride as several people craned to look at her

by MARC BRANDEL

IN every way but one, Ernie Combs was a very ordinary young man. His single difference came to light on his fifth birthday, though it seemed trifling at the time.

It was a sunny day at the beginning of June, and Ernie's father had promised to take him rowing on the lake in Central Park. They were walking through the zoo when it happened. For some time Ernie had been watching his father's shadow moving smoothly, without effort, over the rough path in front of them. It puzzled him.

"Dad," he asked, "why doesn't that black thing bump into things?"

"That's my shadow," his father explained. "When the sun hits something solid, the light can't get through. So that makes a dark patch on the ground. It's called a shadow."

Ernie nodded wisely, not understanding, and trotted on for a while in silence. Then, "Why don't I have a—a what-you-said?" he asked.

"Shadow. Of course, you do. Everybody has a shadow." His father stopped suddenly, looking at the ground, at his own shadow spreading like a dark pool of oil away from his feet. Then he moved a little to one side. He stepped away from his son altogether, and stared at the ground.

"Move," he said at last in an odd, coated voice, his eyes unbelieving.

Ernie obeyed, moving to one side.

"Again!" his father almost shouted. "Let me see you jump. Up and down."

Ernie did. People stopped to watch. His father seized him by the hand.

"We're going home," he said. Ernie could feel his father's distress seeping into his own hand like a painful current, and he began to cry.

Ernie's mother was surprised to see them home so soon. His father explained. She frowned in disbelief. He made Ernie show her. They tried everything. They stood him in front of

every window in the house. They banked whole batteries of lighted bulbs behind him. They made him move around, and they made him keep still. But the fact remained: though in every other way a perfectly ordinary child, Ernie cast no shadow.

Ernie's mother and father determined to keep their son's peculiarity a secret. They both felt it was an unnatural and shameful thing they must keep hidden. They made Ernie stay indoors on sunny days. They kept him away from lighted places. But the law compelled them to send him to school.

Ernie's school-days were a repetitious ordeal. At each new school, there would be a fresh beginning. Timidly, fearfully, he would try to make friends. Sometimes he would forget for a whole hour that he was different from them. But sooner or later they always found out. Their first fear and awe would turn quickly to hate and derision. Ernie would arrive home one day with a split lip or a black eye. There would be the familiar scene: his mother holding him against her—" My poor baby! What have we done to deserve this? "—his father regarding him with resentful pity.

Ernie's parents would move, and Ernie would be sent to yet another school.

As Ernie grew older, he came to accept his strange affliction. He became adept at avoiding bright open spaces, at staying in the shadows. He managed to stay at one school for three years.

At eighteen, Ernie Combs was a pale, rather tall young man with a pleasant, ordinary face and no remarkable aptitude or intelligence. His parents had never dared to have other children. The series of furnished apartments in which they had lived had never been more than hiding-places. Ernie understood that he had ruined their lives. He left home without regret to make his own furtive place in the world.

He had put in a lot of thought about his choice of a career, tending at first towards coal mining or dark-room work in photography. But he had abandoned them both as unrealistic. It was in just such places that a sudden beam of light could most easily betray him. He had come to see that his best hope lay not in total darkness but in indirect lighting.

He found what he wanted with no trouble and was taken on at a small salary in the stock room of a warehouse. The fluorescent lights all over the ceiling, the boxes of merchandise all over the floor, cast such a profusion of shadows that his would never be missed.

He rented a furnished room near by and settled into a cautious routine. For the first time in thirteen years, he felt safe.

At first that was all he asked. But after a surprisingly short time, it wasn't. He was lonely; he wanted friends.

And gradually, out of this desire, hope came back into his life. It was the hope of finding someone to share his life. Somewhere there must be another like himself.

He began to search for that other. He wandered all over the city, peering into corners, following each stealthy figure that kept to the shadows, as he did.

He was astounded at how many there were to follow, how many people who seemed afraid of showing themselves in the light. But once he was sure their reasons were different from his, he had no further interest in them. He was far too ordinary a young man to feel any kinship with the otherwise afflicted. He abandoned them without a qualm—in fact, with a certain contempt—and pressed on in his search.

The first time he saw her, it was only a glimpse. She was about his age, tall and slight, with a pale, scared face and dishevelled hair. He hurried after her at once, but she was hurrying, too, dodging in and out of the crowd without ever getting separated from it and avoiding the fronts of buildings in a familiar way. He lost her outside the armoury.

From then on, it was she he was searching for. It was a month before he saw her again. This time she was coming towards him, hurrying as before. She reached the traffic-lights a few yards away and was forced to stop at the kerb. The sun shone on her long blonde hair, so carelessly parted at the side. Ernie's glance swept the street in front of her feet. He almost fainted with joy.

She cast no shadow.

He started to run towards her and then checked himself. He had caught that look of shamed fear in her eyes that he had so often felt in his own. She thought herself discovered. He stopped and turned and started back up the avenue, walking now beside her. She glanced at him in panic. She had brown eyes and wore no make-up and was beautiful, he noticed. They walked along a foot apart until the next crossroads. The light was against them, and they stopped.

" Look," Ernie whispered. He pointed to the sunlit ground in front of them.

He had to wait perhaps a second. Then she turned her face to his, and her eyes brimmed with tears.

Her name was Christine. They walked together all afternoon, blissfully holding hands, uncaring, delighting in the blankness of the pavement that stretched before them. They hardly spoke,

but by nightfall, when they made their way back to her room, they had interchanged all those secret intimacies that only they—even more than most lovers—could share.

They went to her room because it was larger than his, and because Christine seemed even more afraid of public places than he. That room soon became the only home Ernie had ever known. He was, for a while, marvellously happy there. Christine was a strange, shy girl, but it seemed perfectly understandable to him.

He understood, for instance, her hunger for reassurance. "Do you really think I'm beautiful?" she was for ever asking.

"Of course!" Ernie did.

"Why? I mean, how do I look?"

Ernie would tell her, describing her mouth, her nose, her lovely eyes. She never seemed to tire of this.

"Why don't you look in the mirror?" he teased her once.

But there was no mirror in the room. "It broke," Christine told him.

"Seven years' bad luck."

She trembled, and he put his arms contritely around her.

She loved, too, to have him comb her hair. It was long and soft and silky and badly cut. She cut it herself. "I'm terribly clumsy at it," she said. "But I can't bear going to the hairdresser."

He could understand that. He hated it, too. With the bright light overhead and the white sheet around him. The trouble was Christine hated going anywhere. She didn't have to work; her mother sent her a cheque every month on the condition that she stayed out of Pennsylvania. Christine even hated going to the bank to cash it.

It began to get on his nerves. Since his discovery that he wasn't unique, a change had taken place in him. He was no longer so ashamed. He thought of all the ordinary things he had always longed to do, and now he longed for them all the more.

They argued about it for hours. It was the cause of their first near quarrel. They made it up at once, but the dissension remained. Until at last, one Saturday night when they'd been cooped up in the room all day, Ernie put his foot down.

"I've had enough of it," he said. "I'm fed up with this never going anywhere. You'd think we were freaks. Look, we'll go to some dance place where they have flickering lights. We'll be perfectly safe."

"Oh no, please, darling."

"And put some lipstick on." She still never wore make-up.

Finally, reluctantly, she was forced to give in. She found an old lipstick at the bottom of a trunk and smeared it ineptly on her mouth. She had no compact.

Outside the house they had another near quarrel. This time because Ernie insisted on taking a taxi. He won again. Christine huddled miserably in a corner, and when they reached the dance hall peered with panic-stricken eyes up the stairs and refused to go any farther. Ernie stubbornly led the way. She followed at a distance, like an Arab's wife.

Neither of them had ever learnt to dance. They sat holding hands, watching the couples on the floor. Ernie was delighted by the loud, bad music and the tawdry glamour. It was just what he had longed for all his life.

Christine sat tensely by his side and had several drinks to relax her. Unaccustomed to them, she began to enjoy herself, too. When they left at midnight, she felt quite reckless and almost gay.

Ernie joined her in the foyer and helped her on with her coat. She was smiling as they started down the stairs. Several people craned to look at her. Ernie felt a sudden overpowering pride. He noticed that the walls of the stair-well were amber mirrors, deliberately flattering to the dance hall's clients.

He caught Christine by the hand. "Look, darling," he said. "See for yourself what a handsome couple we make." And he turned her to face the glass beside them.

She drew quickly back, but not quickly enough. He felt her trying to tear her hand from his and, looking in the mirror, saw his own pleasantly reflected face, his well-cut blue suit and loosely knotted tie.

He dropped her hand as if it had bitten him and watched her run, sobbing, down the stairs. But he didn't go after her.

Ernie had suddenly understood. He understood what others had felt about him all his life, his parents' distress, and why his schoolmates had first feared and then hated him. He not only understood. In his ordinary way, he agreed with them.

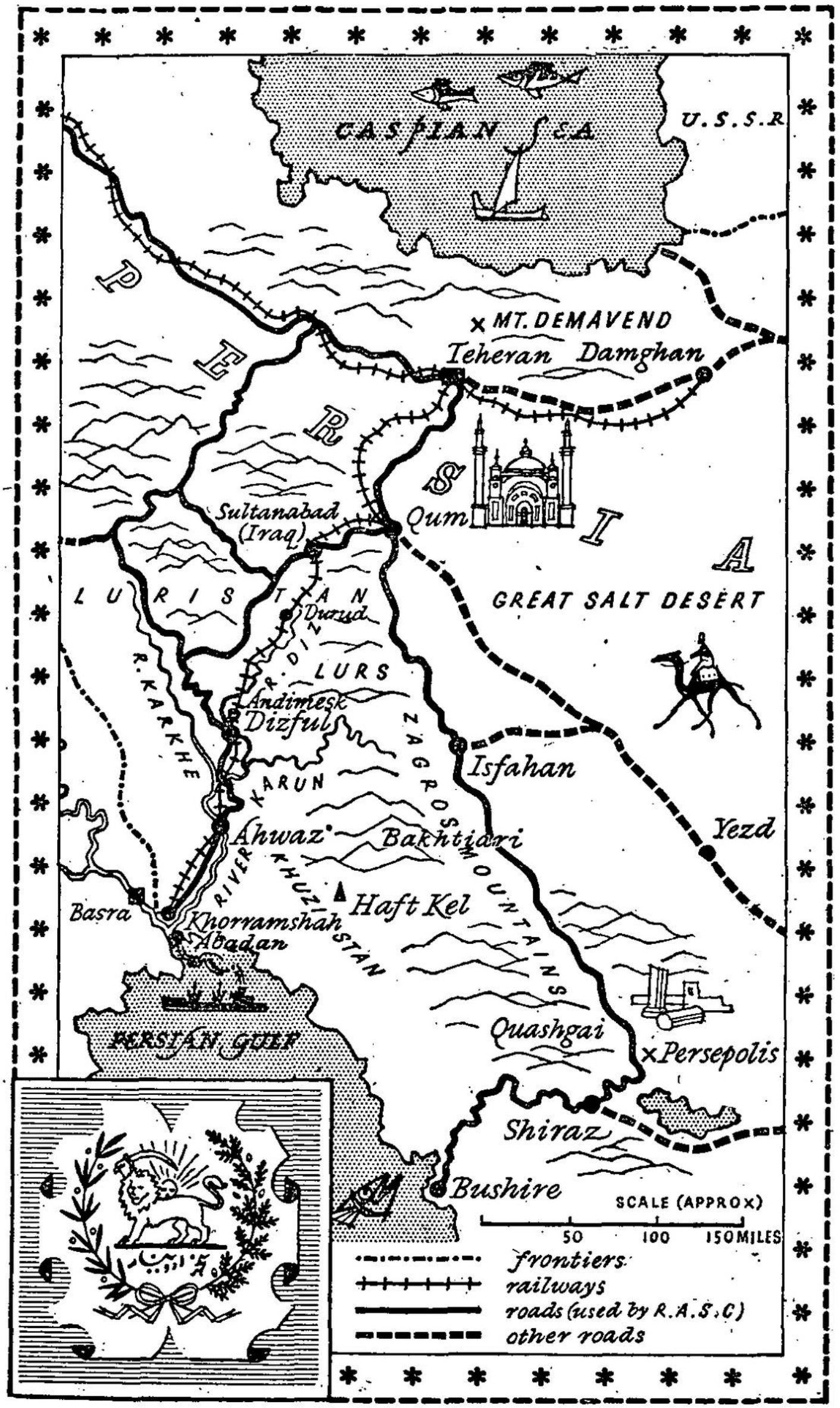
When he reached the street, he didn't try to find Christine. He walked off towards his own room, whistling a superior little tune. How dare she deceive him like that!

The monstrous, the unnatural girl had no reflection.

★ ★ ★

Middle age: when you begin to exchange your emotions for symptoms.

IRVIN S. COBB


CASPIAN SEA
U.S.S.R
PERSIA
MT. DEMAVEND
Teheran
Damghan
Qum
Sultanabad
(Iraq)
LURISTAN
Durud
R. DIZ
R. KARKHE
LURS
Andimesk
Dizful
ZAGROS MOUNTAINS
Isfahan
GREAT SALT DESERT
Yezd
KARUN RIVER
Ahwaz
Bakhtiari
KHUZISTAN
Haft Kel
Basra
Khorramshah
Abadan
PERSIAN GULF
Quashgai
Persepolis
Shiraz
Bushire
SCALE (APPROX)
50 100 150 MILES
frontiers
railways
roads (used by R.A.S.C)
other roads

On the field telephone, a sinister, unknown voice orders Bill Conway, a young R.A.S.C. Major, to get out of Persia.

In charge of war-time convoys from Ahwaz, in the desert, to Russia, Conway has put down riots, incurring the hatred of the terrorist Friends of Iran. In Teheran, he volunteers for a secret mission under Lt.-Col. "Sandy" Mackenzie, Chief of Intelligence. Conway's fiancée, Jean, has thrown him over, and he now meets Tania, Sandy's lovely, red-haired, Polish secretary, who decodes a Russian document taken by him from a wrecked car. It refers obscurely to "meeting before surnay," and "three tents in Cairo: two fly on: Elias is a Chinaman."

As Agent 166, *Conway is sent with an escort to bring out four tons of gold from Shiraz. En route in Isfahan, Aristide Manassian, brocade dealer and loyal agent, shows terror when Conway produces Sergeant Morris's photograph of The Skull, suspected leader of the Friends of Iran. Conway reports to Major Brooks in Shiraz, and dines with Soulimain Abbas in the Bagh-i-Aram, the Garden of Heart's Content, where he finds the "meeting" of the Friends is to be held. Feigning drunkenness, Conway leaves, dismisses his driver, and climbs back over the wall. He is challenged by the sinister voice that threatened him on the phone. Imprisoned, at gun-point, in the garden pavilion, he refuses to give away his cipher. A smashing blow on the head leaves Conway lying unconscious in the darkness.*

I DON'T think I was out for very long; I groped my way back to consciousness with throbbing head and coated mouth. I was terribly thirsty. The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was the square patch of moonlight on the floor; I was lying on a pile of sacks in the corner of the little room.

Raising myself on an elbow, I ran my fingers over the ragged cut on the back of my head, wincing as the caked blood pulled at the matted hair round it. Then I looked at my watch; it was still going—and the time was half past twelve. I crawled round the room on a painful tour of inspection; the door was locked and the window, barred, too high to reach. No sound came from the outside, but, by pressing my ear close to the inner wall, I could hear the vague murmur of voices.

There was another sound from inside the room—a faint gurgling, swishing noise. I suppose that my raging thirst helped me to identify this sound. I must have water—and the stream was flowing beneath the pavilion, under the very room I was in.

I remembered that most of the channels could be thrown open to the inside for extra cooling. Scratching away the dirt with my fingers, I soon found the cracks in the boards and then a sunken ring-bolt. Listening at the planks, I could hear the water quite clearly.

After some more digging and pulling, one end of the board came up quite easily, and a draught of cold air flowed up round me. Resting the end of the board on my back, I worked my head and shoulders as far into the hole as possible.

The stream, black and smooth, chuckled by in a stone trough, its surface only about two feet below the level of the floor; from side to side of the channel ran a series of cross-braces, halfway between water and boards. As I scooped the water into my mouth with my free hand, I could see narrow strips of light reflected on the surface from between the floor-boards of the next room; stretching farther down, I could make out a faint patch of moonlight where the channel ran out into the garden.

I reckoned there would be just enough room to get through.

Holding the end of the board up, I turned round and slid into the hole, feet first. The water was shallow, but icy cold. I grasped the first cross-brace and let the board fall slowly back into position on the top of my head, which had started to hurt me horribly; now my legs were trailing out in front of me in the rush of the water and the force of it let me slide along easily, hand over hand, from cross-brace to cross-brace.

The stream must have acted as a sounding-board; as I drifted cautiously under the next room, I could hear every word that was being spoken above me. The conversation was in Persian.

Soulimain was speaking, angrily: " I tell you he had the drink—a double dose. He should have been unconscious in an hour."

The Skull answered him.

" It didn't work, that's all—The question is, what do we do with him? "

"Make him talk first and then cut his throat," said another voice. This was interesting. I determined to stay as long as the cold would let me.

Sliding the belt out of my bush-jacket, I made a sling with it round one of the joists to take the weight off my arms. The water hardly made any sound as it flowed round my shoulders.

My friend of bridge and garden was speaking again.

"You are a fool, Houssain," he said. "I do not think we shall get much out of him. He may be stupid but he seems brave, and any questioning will take time that we cannot afford. What he said about the cipher being compromised is probably true.

"Then, most important of all, he is not an ordinary agent. He is an army officer here on official business. There could be no ignoring his disappearance. The army would have to take a hand and this is just what we cannot afford at this juncture. We do not want forces from the north deployed against us here until we are certain that there is no time to replace them." He rapped the table in emphasis as he said this.

"No, I think a small lesson in manners—which I shall administer personally. I am sure he will then be glad to get out of Shiraz as soon as possible."

"Madness," said Soulimain. I made a mental note about that gentleman for our next meeting, if any.

"Can't you see, thickhead, that the fact he has been here will force Brooks's hand. After it he will want to get the gold away as soon as possible. The sooner it is moved, the better for us. Let the Major go, let him start with his convoy. We shall take it from him. Like a whipped dog, he will creep back to Teheran and not be employed again."

"Do the arrangements stand as they are, then?" said Soulimain.

"Yes, my man in the bank will let me know when they load."

"I do not like it," complained Houssain. "Why not take it at one of the passes?"

"Because, fool, that is just where they would expect trouble, and consequently be extra alert. At Persepolis the road is open, but we find cover on the terraces. Also, whether they pass by day or night, we shall have no outside witnesses—you know your people will not go near the place."

"What about your men, then?"

"I have made it worth their while to overcome their fear."

"And the British armoured cars?"

"You mean that they are bullet-proof—I have a little surprise for them in a box of grenades and some cans of petrol."

"What happens to the gold?" said Soulimain.

A new biting note came into that voice and, for once, I was able to enjoy it.

"I have made the necessary arrangements, my friend; it will be taken from the ambush and cached till we can distribute it."

Soulimain was not impressed.

"Where will it be hidden?" he said.

"That, I will not tell even you, Soulimain, though you are my trusted ally."

There was a short silence. Then The Skull's voice grew brisk. "Now to the other business; how are you getting on with the buying of *gaz*—is it proving difficult?"

I heard the word distinctly—*gaz*. It was the name of a sweetmeat beloved in southern Persia. Made from the sticky exudation of the branches of a certain bush, it was said to be the origin of Biblical manna. Mixed with flour and nuts and powdered with willow pollen, it looked and tasted like a white nougat.

A voice, grumbling, said: "It is almost impossible to get and I think it very foolish. Why all this secrecy and waste of time? Why not steal it? That would be so simple."

There was a crash of a fist on the table. "Because, fool, a theft would draw attention to what we are proposing to do. How many times must I tell you that all we are doing now, this gold and the tribe, is a feint, a detail. The other is our goal, and quiet steady buying, is the most important thing for the next two months. You *must* get it, at all costs, for my other way is closed."

I had heard enough. I undid my belt and slid with the stream out from under the house. I crawled and wallowed down the channel for some distance, then ran, as fast as my frozen legs would carry me, to the far end of the garden. Luckily, the wall was lower there, and on my third try I managed to scramble over.

At three in the morning, cold, soaked, and with an aching head, I reached John Brooks's bungalow.

All the lights were on, and in the hall were six of Hervey's men with Sergeant Morris; all were armed. The Sergeant's face lit up when he saw me.

I went straight to the bedroom; Brooks, half dressed, was sitting up with a turban of bandages on his head, topped by an ice-bag. He looked very bad-tempered. Cold and miserable as I was, I stood at the end of the bed and burst out laughing.

"You don't look so hot yourself," he said, "but thank God you're safe."

I said: "How did you acquire that?"

"I got your message and decided to wait up. Someone called to me from the garden like the other night—said he had something to give me. Like a bloody fool, I walked straight into it. I was promptly sapped with a sand-bag."

He looked at my sodden clothes. "And what the hell have you been doing—bathing?"

"Sort of," I said, and started my story, but he cut me short. "You had better go and have another bath—a hot one. I'll come and listen while you have it." He sat on the end of the tub while I talked and soaked out the chill. Then he bathed my head and dressed the cut with plaster.

"What is *gaz*, John?" I said as he finished trimming the hair away with scissors.

" Sticky sweets," he answered, looking at me anxiously. " Are you sure you are all right, don't you think I ought to call the doctor? "

" I'm all right, but they started talking about buying a lot of *gaz*—just before I got away."

He shrugged his shoulders. " There's plenty about," he said, " it shouldn't be difficult. What I'm most interested in is what do we do now? "

I went on quickly: " I thought it all out on my walk back; this is what I propose we try to do . . ."

It was the next afternoon. Persepolis was drowsing in the hot sun when the lorry turned off the main road by the terrace and bumped along the side track that led up the hill behind the ruins. There it stopped; I got down from the cab, and going round to the back, climbed inside the canopy.

Some twenty of Hervey's men were sitting on the floor, all looking very hot, bored, and slightly bewildered. They stopped looking bored, however, when I told them why we had come to Shiraz, what had happened yesterday, and what we proposed to do about it that night.

" Now, listen carefully," I said. " This is the first stage in the plan. You saw when we left the compound this afternoon that two of the cars were still stripped down, and without their wheels—anyone watching would think that we couldn't be going just yet, but we are making a quick getaway tonight, and leaving them behind as they are.

" Now, ten of you have been detailed with Sergeant Morris; have you got your arms, ammunition, and iron rations? And are you wearing gym shoes? "

There was a chorus of " Yes, sir."

" Your job for the first part is easy—all you have to do is to stay in this truck for the afternoon. Don't show yourselves outside it. The driver will keep any stranger away. The rest of you," I grinned, " are coming with me on a conducted tour of the ruins." I saw the look of dismay on their faces.

" You needn't acquire culture unless you want to—but try and look intelligent and keep your eyes open for anyone watching us.

" After the tour, which I promise won't be long, we shall come back here and get in the lorry again; then I'll take it up the track to that cliff on the hill. There are caves there that are supposed to be the tombs of the kings. There is a point where the track is sunken, and cannot be overlooked. When we are there, I want you to get out and start wandering around, looking in the caves.

" This is the most important part—only half your number must be in view at one time, and gradually Sergeant Morris's party must get, one by one, into the second cave from the left, and stay hidden.

" Then the rest of you will get in the lorry again and go back to Shiraz, making yourselves look as numerous as possible."

" Anyone watching will see a party arrive, and what looks like the same number leave—they won't know that half have stayed behind in the cave."

" What do we do, sir? " asked Sergeant Morris. He still had the camera strung round his neck.

" We think a reception committee will be waiting here tonight for the convoy to come through. We shall be uphill from them, with the shadow in our favour, ready to give them a nice surprise. You can come with me on the tour, Morris, and take some photos. You'll have to dodge into the cave later."

I dragged my party round the ruins and I must say they played their part. All the terraces and reliefs were inspected. I spent most of my time looking for possible ways of approach and cover; the men reported that they could not see anyone watching. On the terraces themselves, there was not a living thing to be seen in the quivering heat; only the basking lizards scuttled away under stones at our approach.

We repeated the performance in the sunken road by the cliff caves. When my party—for I was staying with Sergeant Morris—had all taken cover, I went behind the lorry and changed my bush-shirt with that of the other Sergeant who was going back to Shiraz. Then I took from him a tommy-gun, ammunition, and a haversack which held a Very pistol and some cartridges.

As a final check, I told him to repeat the last orders I had given to Hervey before I left.

" Leave Shiraz at eight," he said, " and make on arriving here at about eleven. If we see a green light—all clear; stop at the tea-house and pick you up.

" White for danger. Stop convoy at once and close the armoured cars round the lorries. The drivers of lorries to take cover behind the cars. Open up with everything, following the direction of your fire."

" Right," I said, " but tell Captain Hervey to keep it down as much as possible and to load the gold that will not go in the cars round the sides of the lorries. It will act as protection."

I put my cap on his head.

" When I am under cover, get your lot together and go straight back to Shiraz. Sit in front and try to look like me." He was very nearly my build and colouring.

From the mouth of the cave, I saw the lorry turn off the track, and slowly dwindle, before its stream of dust, along the straight white road towards Shiraz. I divided the party into two groups, one keeping watch while the others rested on the hard stone floor at the back.

I was desperately tired, the cut hurt, and my head was throbbing. I felt the beginnings of a cold from my soaking of the night before. Sleep was out of the question: I should never wake properly when I most needed to be alert. I lay propped up on the boulders at the mouth of the cave, looking out over the green plain; thinking, thinking.

First of my job. I now knew, by luck, exactly what was planned for us tonight.

But as soon as that was clear, something else cropped up. This talk of *gaz*: John Brooks had dismissed it, but I was still worried. Then I smiled, remembering the absurd experiment in the bazaar at Shiraz that morning. I had gone out to buy some, expecting shortage, and found a glut. I bought nine boxes of different makes and sizes.

Had I misheard the word The Skull had used? I got out my notebook and started to write: "To purchase of *gaz*—240 rials." Then I crossed it out. Sandy would never let me hear the end of it.

Sobered suddenly, my thoughts turned to Tania. Was it really the thing—on a rebound of what had happened just before? I knew what I wanted to think, but was frightened to think it. And so back to Jean—and what would have happened if it had lasted. Would it have been the flower of the early promise—the good companions, laughing at life, the lovers in perfect accord, their bond getting stronger with each act of giving and taking? Or would it have slowed and bittered—first, quarrels and sour nagging, then, the slow, blind acceptance of a heavy chain that each was too weary to break? I would never know now, and perhaps I was glad.

I thought of other women—the brief touching of minds and bodies, before one went on—giving a little, taking a little, but learning all the time—never finding rest.

The sun went down, turning Persepolis to rose and gold, while the shadows lengthened and purpled. It was very still. Behind me in the cave, the men were quiet, moving only when they had to change the look-out—perhaps they were thinking the same kind of thoughts as I?

It was well after eight, when the one on duty touched my arm and pointed.

"Something is coming across the plain," he said.

It was a camel caravan. I watched them through my glasses.

The train of about twenty camels were moving in single file towards us, from the far side of the valley. I counted some thirty men, some riding, others walking, with rifles slung across their backs. When they reached the road, they turned along it and into the courtyard of the deserted tea-house below us. It was so quiet that we could hear their shouts, and the squeals of the camels as they were forced to kneel.

The men made a fire and gathered round it; then some wandered on the lower terraces, but no one came up the hill towards our hiding-place. Though the moon was one night on the wane, now it rose and sailed high in the sky, bathing the scene in unearthly beauty. There were no half-tones; just the white reflection of the stone and the black of the shadows.

Some time after ten, a beam of light groped in the air from towards the south; it disappeared and then came on steadily across

the plain towards us. It was a car, travelling fast. It pulled up with a jerk at the tea-house and then reversed off the road behind it.

Five men got out and started unloading some cases, but in that light they were too far away to be recognized, even with the glasses. Then the men from the camels gathered round them and soon their fire was extinguished.

They divided into little groups and dispersed—some to the lower terrace, some to the sides of the road, and some to the roof of the tea-house. I noticed the contents of the boxes had been shared out amongst them; I could not see what they were, but I had a very good idea. I thought it was time for us to move as well.

I took the leaders of the three parties to the back of the cave and gave them their orders. " You know the approximate positions to take up," I said. " Use all the shadow you can to get there—take it slow and easy and don't make a sound. Watch for the white Very light and let go with all you've got. Keep your fire depressed as much as possible to avoid the convoy—they'll have to take their chance on ricochets. The first party can move off now."

After I had checked their weapons, they left at five-minute intervals. With whispered " Good lucks," they disappeared through the mouth of the cave; last, with the tommy-gun slung across my shoulder and a Luger and a Very pistol stuck in my belt, I ran crouching into the shadow of the sunken road.

It did not take long to reach our positions. The moon gave all the shadow in our favour. Soon I was lying with the last group behind a long low balustrade, slightly above and within thirty yards of the nearest Persians on the terrace below.

You could see them easily—dark patches against the stone and sometimes the glint of a rifle barrel. Our fire would command them, as well as those on the tea-house roof and in the ditch on the far side of the road. To our left, was the palace of Xerxes and the road to Shiraz. It was all quiet and very beautiful; I remember thinking that of all the actions, large and small, that had been and would be fought in this war, none could take place in more lovely or strange surroundings.

Nothing happened for a time; then there was another flicker of lights from the south; they steadied and came on straight towards us. I counted them: one—two—three—four—five—six—seven—eight pairs. Yes, it must be Hervey—and he was dead on time.

Slowly, but steadily, the gap between us narrowed; now you could hear the noise of the engines. For the last time, I checked the colour of the Very cartridge in the breach of the pistol; I found that I was shivering.

At a quarter of a mile, I heard the black car by the tea-house start up; then it slid out across the road, blocking it completely.

One hundred yards—and the hammer of the pistol clicked loudly as I cocked it. Then I fired; and with the report, a white star shot up, hanging in the sky.

The Friends of Iran must have been most disconcerted, for

Hervey had the job taped. The two leading cars swung in side by side and pulled up dead. The lorries closed tight behind them while the other cars came round to cover the flanks. Then hell was let loose, with everyone firing at once.

It all went too fast and was over too quickly for me to have any coherent memory of the next few minutes. I only remember a confused medley of sound—the deep clatter of the Vickers mixed with the sharper note of the light automatics; occasionally, the crack of a rifle, and once the explosion of a grenade. There was the pale flash from gun muzzles, the fiery streak of tracer, shouts, the whine of a ricochet, and the screaming of the camels. Most clear was the feel of my own tommy-gun, as it pumped and pulled away from me while the ejected cartridges tinkled on the stone pavement.

The firing became sporadic; then died away quite suddenly. The black car was on fire, with two bodies sprawled on the road in front of it. I saw a tall thin shape running diagonally across the terrace below me, making for the palace of Xerxes on the left. I saw the fair hair, the long legs; it must be The Skull.

I gave him a quick burst—and missed. I tried another and the gun jammed. I dropped it, cursing, and scrambled to my feet. Forgetting all my responsibility in the conduct of this affair, I set off in pursuit.

It was a weird chase. Running, crawling, darting from shadow to shadow, I slowly gained ground. My quarry had seen me, and twice turned to fire, while I dropped flat, scared stiff. Then his automatic must have jammed too, for he threw it away and ran on. He was only about fifteen yards ahead when we reached the great gate of the palace of Xerxes, and with a last wild shot from his pistol, he disappeared into its shadow.

The gate was square, the sides thirty feet high, hewn from single blocks of stone. On each was carved a huge winged bull, with the face of a bearded king. Both stared out, unmoved, into the silver light; between them lay the black pool of shadow.

I gained the cover of the near end and stopped short, waiting. The Skull was in there somewhere, and as I tried to check my panting breath I watched and listened for any sign of him. In contrast with the brilliance outside, it was so dark I could see nothing. Then a stone hurtled out of the blackness and clattered near me—then another, a little closer.

"You want me to fire first," I thought, "so that you can aim back at the flash of my gun—or rather, a little to the right of it. I'll oblige—but I think it will put your calculations a bit out, for I'm sure you don't know that I'm left-handed."

Stretching my left arm along the wall as far as possible, I turned my wrist in and fired in his approximate direction. It worked; a bullet smacked into the wall just to the left of my hand; but I did not notice it for I was watching for the flash of his gun. Swinging my arm in, I fired three times in an arc, starting just to the right of where the flame had been.

There was silence after the thunder of the reports in that narrow space—then a sob came from out of the darkness opposite me.

I waited; with a bump and a slither something moved and crossed the line of shadow into the light. He was bent almost double, trying to raise his gun with both hands. As he turned towards me, I could see a great dark stain spreading over the front of his shirt.

It was no time to take chances; unwillingly, I fired again. He stood for a few seconds in the same position; then the gun clattered to the ground. Turning, like a great tree falling, he gave at the knees and crashed on his face.

I turned him over. The blood was bubbling at the back of his throat; then, with a wet rush, it spilled from his mouth, to form a black pool on the white stone floor beside us. He was a tall, fair young terrorist, but he was not The Skull.

I picked up his gun and walked back slowly to where I could see the car lights shining. I felt tired, sick, and shaky. This was the anticlimax; for the last few minutes I had neither known nor cared what had happened to the gold or the convoy.

I found Hervey, who reported all well. Such had been the surprise, that we had only one casualty, a driver with a flesh wound in the shoulder which was soon patched up. Besides my kill, five Persians were dead and my friend Soulimain was among them. His greed and curiosity must have vanquished his fear, but all he had got was a burst of fire at point-blank range for his trouble; now his fat carcass lay spread-eagled in the road. The rest of the party had got away, taking all their wounded with them.

This saved us trouble, but there was still a lot to be done. We cut the camels loose and sanded the blood and cleared the wreckage off the road. Six bodies had to be buried. We put them down one of the old well-shafts; no one would ever find them there for they were very deep. The young terrorist was first stripped of his few personal belongings, which I took with me for examination by Sandy. Then I had a quick talk to John Brooks, who had followed up discreetly in his car—" Just in case," as he said, and arranged that he would square any trouble with the Persian authorities.

We said good-bye, for I had decided to push on through the night; I think we all felt that, if we stopped now, we should never get started again. Though we took it very easily, I don't remember much about the journey—only that I leaned against the edge of the turret, trying to stop my legs shaking and my eyes closing as I stared down the road ahead.

Soon after dawn, we picked up from the roadside Bezard Ali, my faithful Quashgai driver, who had been on leave on a visit to his tribe in the hills. Then, at a wide open place, I pulled the convoy off the road and, even though it was daylight, formed a tight hollow square.

While tea was brewing, I sat in my truck, going through the belongings of the terrorist I had killed in the gateway.

There was an " S " scratched on the stock of the long-barrelled Luger that he had carried. A wrist-watch, some money, and a map made up the sum total.

Bezard was watching me, sulking. He had heard enough already from the men to know that he had missed a party after his own heart the night before. He was scowling at me as if I had arranged this deliberately, which, I suppose, in a way, was right and just. So I gave him the terrorist's Luger as a consolation prize and then turned to the map, spreading it out flat on the bonnet of the truck.

It was a standard British Army map, of the small scale that covered most of Persia. It had seen great use, for the folds were frayed and the surface shiny. I went over it inch by inch; it was clear except for two separate sets of markings.

Far to the north, a pencilled oval had been drawn, covering an area that would be about eighty miles long and twenty wide. Through its length, ran a thick broken line and a thin wavy one, side by side. These, I knew, were the railway and the River Diz that ran beside it: the ground marked was somewhere south-west of the town of Durud. That one would have to wait, for the other group was right on our doorstep.

The road from Isfahan to Shiraz runs nearly due north and south; to the left of this—the west—the colour on the map changed quickly through the green and yellow of the low ground to the deep brown and purple of the hills and high peaks.

The contour lines writhed and twisted in and out of the valleys. At right angles to the road, crossing it and spread at irregular intervals between Shiraz and Isfahan were a series of dotted lines. On each was a circle of red which contained a numeral.

Bezard was dividing his time between playing with his new gun and peering over my shoulder; I never knew quite how much he understood about a map. I stopped looking at it and went over to show him the mechanism of the Luger. " It was a good fight last night, Bezard, I'm sorry that you were not with me."

" Aie, sahib, and so am I. Did you kill many? "

" Only one," I said, " and he was not the one I wanted. The one I sought gave me this "—I felt the back of my head gingerly— " the same that was in the car at Bisitun."

" We must find that one," said Bezard.

" Yes, but I think he may have gone to the mountains, he may even be among your people; it would be difficult."

" There is strange talk in the kalantars; they would not speak in front of me, for they know that I work for the English."

I went back to the map.

" See, Bezard, this red line is the road." I pointed. " We are now here." Then I ran my finger up the paper to the left on the first of the marked lines. " This is a valley," I said, pointing to the west. " The one there. What is its name? "

" The Valley of the Camel," he said at once.

I went down to the next. " This one, near Deh Bid; can you think of that one? "

He screwed his face up in the effort of visualizing the lie of the land. " The Pass of the Three Lions," he said at length.

So we went down the marks, he naming them in succession but with more confidence, faster: there was some other way in which they were coming quickly to his mind.

" That is good, Bezard," I said at length. " How is it that you know them so well? "

" I did not see at first, sahib, but they are all the tribal tracks from the kishlak to the yilak."

I looked at the numbers; from the south, northwards, they read in order 30, 2, 2, 3, 4, 4, and 6. There could be little doubt of the date on which the surnay, a kind of long reed trumpet, would sound in the several kalantars and send the tribes in successive sweeping waves down to the road. " We must find that man," I said, " but I do not wish it to make trouble for you in the tribe."

He nodded. " We must have good reason. I shall be thinking."

He was very quiet for the rest of the journey, and it was not until we were crossing the Bridge of the Thirty-three Arches, over the river to Isfahan, that he produced the answer.

" If such a man as you, sahib," he said suddenly, " had a wife—like the lady with the burning hair in Teheran "—he shot a quick glance sideways—" and such a one as this long man stole her and made for the mountains, it would be right for you to pursue in vengeance. My people understand these things and would expect justice to be done. With such a story, every man would answer my questions."

I smacked him on the knee. " Bezard, I think you've got it."

As we came down off the long, two-tiered bridge and past Shah Reza's statue to turn off to the consulate, I was still thinking of his phrase, " A wife like the lady with the burning hair: "—perhaps he had got it in more ways than one!

At the consulate, I gladly signed over the responsibility for a million pounds of gold. Then I said good-bye to Hervey and his men; a platoon of lorried infantry had come down to see them through the safer stage and now my part of the job was over. I had a bath and changed, for I was to stay there, and then got down to writing my cipher message to Sandy: *Extraction successful. Small party on way but no damage. Bagged one cold Friend. Am sending his things with report to you by safe hand. Skull did not show up or got away. Am certain is back in mountains. Propose to go with Bezard and winkle out. Fourteen days leave please.*

The sun was down when I had finished and I was dropping on my feet, but there was one more job I had to do.

I summoned Bezard—I was not going anywhere alone in that town again—and went first to the street of the money-changers. There, with difficulty, I managed to buy three silver tomans. These big coins, the size and value of a five-shilling piece, are solid silver and withdrawn from circulation. From here, it was not far to the opium press.

It was a high, vaulted chamber, dim and cool in the day as the nave of a cathedral; now the flaring oil lamps threw grotesque shadows on the white walls from the beams and ropes of the machinery. At the end of the horizontal bar that was fixed to the great wooden screw, the blind camel circled slowly, endlessly; perched on the beam beside him, his sightless master sat with his goad in his hand.

I did not think we made a sound as we came down the steps into the chamber; I was wearing desert boots, Bezard, behind me, in slippers; but above the squealing of the screw, Ali heard.

One sharp word and the camel stopped. Ali's blind face turned, the red sockets looking straight towards me. His nostrils flared; he was smelling us.

" *Salaam Aleikum*—Peace be on you," I said.

" And on you peace," came the conventional answer; then sharply: " Who comes? "

I had walked up to within a few feet of where he squatted, level with my shoulders.

" A friend," I said. " Aristide Manassian said to give you this." I held out a silver toman. He snatched it and felt the face and edges; then after a quick bite, it disappeared inside his robe.

" Who is the other one? " he asked.

" A friend also, he has gone to watch the door."

" Come closer, then, friend of Aristide's, so that I may touch you."

A hand like a knotted swamp root came out and ran over my cap, down my face, and to my drill tunic. It lingered for a moment on the badges on my shoulders. Round us all the time flowed the sweet cloying smell of opium.

" Aristide is with his fathers," he said.

" I know."

" But four nights ago he came here. He was hurried and he smelt of fear. If a ferangi of the army comes, he told me, with a crown on his shoulder and a long straight nose, tell him this and this."

He paused, concentrating.

" First, the surnay would sound early and that soon he would know the time. That he would bring that later. Then, that your second riddle was connected to it but more important; that he believed it had something to do with the railway. That is all."

" Thank you, O Ali! " I touched his hand with the second coin.

He held it closely, quiet for a moment before he spoke.

" Aristide said that you were as good a friend to him as he had been to me. I thirst for vengeance, but I am old and blind. Do you know who did this thing? "

" I know and I will see to it."

" Then you have my prayers and blessing. I will tell you one last thing—as a riddle, O lover of riddles! The man you seek, the very place he has in—" he hesitated —" things, is *here*."

He held up the silver toman. In the same moment a stab from the goad bit the camel in the flank; I had to duck as the beam swept forward, and Ali was gone, circling on his endless journey, like a dead planet round the sun.

Back in the consulate, Sandy's reply was awaiting me. It had come in two halves. The first was in the consular code: *Fourteen days local leave granted to Major Conway Isfahan. Please instruct this officer. British troops will not repeat not enter tribal territory in any circumstance.*

The other in our own cipher: *Gold might help. Consulate will advance as many sovereigns as you can carry. Take Bezard if advisable. Tania and I say good luck be careful.*

The cunning old basket; I could just see him erecting this umbrella to cover himself in case I was written off.

I ripped open my report and added the details of that evening, and the business of the *gaz* that I had left out before. I finished: "M's message about the railway may mean something to you; word *gaz* was quite distinct.

"My immediate plans: am assuming figures on map are dates and the gold, if Skull had it, would be some form of payment on account. Now he will have to arrange delay. Should start this from southern end, earliest. I shall work down from north, hoping we meet.

"I realize officially I go beyond the pale: there can be no help. Request deliver enclosed should anything happen to me."

Then I wrote a short letter to Tania; I said all the things I wanted to say and would hate never to be said. It is the only time a man can write without any restraint, for he will not be there if the letter is read.

It was cool and I felt very safe in my room at the consulate. I smoked a last pipe as I undressed. It was not until I put the odd bits from my pockets beside the bed that I felt again the last of the silver tomans and remembered Ali's riddle.

The man and the place he has in things are here. I turned the heavy coin over. On one side, a crown, an oak-and-laurel spray, some writing, and the date. On the other, the same spray round the nation's emblem—the lion backed by the rising sun.

I searched everything; I counted the number of leaves in the spray, the dots in the border, the rays sticking out from the sun. Nothing gave any meaning to a single fact that I could remember.

I was staring at the lion's face when my gaze shifted a little to the right. Behind his mane and over his back peeped the disk that was the sun's centre. I stared at it hard and then rubbed my eyes. It had not the flat surface that would be expected.

Etched into it were two round holes and they were no flaw. The closer one looked, the harder one looked, the more it became a perfect replica of a skull. A skull in the very centre of the crest of Persia; raise the sword arm higher and it became the emblem of something else.

The Skull was the centre of the Friends of Iran.

IT was a perfect summer day.

We were four days' march south-west of Isfahan. Bezard was guiding me, without map or compass, but with quiet certainty, towards the yilak, the summer pasture, of each kalantar.

The country was very like the Highlands of Scotland—green rounded hills, with outcrops of granite and patches of scree. The difference was in the vegetation; in place of heather and bracken, there were acres of wild lupins and blue poppies; for rowan and fir, clumps of tamarisk, oleander, and wan trees.

Our caravan picked its way slowly along the river-bed, by now almost dry; Bezard and I were riding donkeys, while he was leading a third, piled high with baggage. I had brought everything I could think of, including two sleeping-bags, cooking utensils, rations, a sack of sugar, and a small chest of tea—the last two making most acceptable presents to hosts on our way.

We both carried rifles, while Bezard had the Luger I had given him stuck in the belt of his khaki slacks. I was wearing a thick flannel shirt and riding-breeches, but I had brought one army tunic, at Bezard's request, for any ceremonial occasion. Both of us were in good spirits; I, because each mile that I had put between my donkey's tail and Isfahan was helping to clear my head and ease both body and mind.

I had got back there with the convoy nearly at the end of my tether; but already our three nights under the stars—the netting of mountain trout in the streams and the shooting of hares on the hillside—had made me feel a different person. There was only one problem now: the finding of The Skull among these hills.

Bezard was cheerful, too, for once again he was in his own land and had the prospect of showing off his Major to his cousin, the kalantar or chieftain, and the thousand families over which he held sway. So far our welcome had been hospitable, but hesitant.

Yes, they knew of such a man as we described, but they had not seen him for many moons. Our next stop would be with Bezard's cousin and here we were certain of a welcome.

Ahead then—like the dim blue peaks that were ever before us—was an adventure, for very few Europeans had the privilege of staying with the tribe in their yilak. My only regret was that Bezard had forbidden a camera—"The evil eye, sahib," he had said.

So, sitting astride my bright-coloured carpet saddle, I felt grave, expectant, but at peace with the whole world.

The day went quickly, and it was late afternoon when we came to the head of the valley. It narrowed quite suddenly, finishing in a low col between two rocky crags. The stream we had been following descended in a series of waterfalls.

"The yilak is quite near," Bezard said. We found a path up the slope and soon stood on the crest, looking down on the tribe's summer pasture. The hills, heliotrope in the late afternoon, formed a perfect circle—perhaps two miles across—round a lush, flat plain. The stream wound its way across, and along its courses were dotted the low black felt tents, looking just like molehills.

Apart and conspicuous, were the kalantar's quarters—a great golden tent made of goatskin—that seemed to glow with colour. The smoke from the cooking-fires rose straight in the air; the herds were coming in from pasture, and the women, with water-jars on their heads, were passing to and from the stream. It was a scene of great content.

When we were within a quarter-mile of the kalantar's tent, I dismounted; sitting on an outcrop of rock, I lit a pipe and watched Bezard ride on alone to announce our arrival.

He was gone for a long time. At length, there was a commotion round the big tent; two figures separated from the group standing there and started walking towards me. One was Bezard Ali and the other an elderly bearded man who held himself magnificently; by his air of authority and the respectful greeting of those he passed, I guessed that this must be the kalantar himself. I was surprised—it was an unusual honour for him to come out to greet a guest in person.

As they came closer, I knew that something was wrong; Bezard was hanging back, slouching, his face as black as thunder. I got to my feet and knocked out my pipe. The kalantar stopped a few paces from me and began the customary greeting; he was a fine man, with a face like a hawk, and his black eyes bored straight into mine.

After the greeting, there was an uncomfortable pause; he tugged at his beard, and, while his manner was courteous, he seemed distant and ill at ease.

Then he spoke again.

"It is with great pleasure that I meet you, Major. I have heard much of your prowess and kindness from my cousin. My regret is that my poor camp cannot offer you hospitality that is befitting."

This was unbelievable. Even without invitation, I knew that one had only to ask for hospitality at any tent of the tribes all over Persia to get it as a matter of course. There was no question of degree; however poor, they would give and you would accept the best they had, in the same spirit. There was some reason behind this and I felt a thrill of excitement.

Bezard snorted and spat on the ground; clearly he was very angry.

"O kalantar!" I said, "I have none of the virtues ascribed to me. I am just a traveller, a friend of your cousin, who has journeyed three days to meet you. I ask for your protection; what you eat and what shelter you have, I shall be honoured to share—is it not so commanded in the holy Koran?"

That got him—I could feel his embarrassment.

"The guest tents are full," he muttered.

I warmed to my work. "Then, with your permission, I will sleep beside your tent."

Bezard, who had been staring at his feet, could contain himself no longer.

"Tell him the truth, cousin; he is a man—do not treat him like

a child." Then turning to me, he said: "I am ashamed of my tribe, sahib, ashamed of my cousin because he is afraid to trust you."

The kalantar grabbed him by the elbow, and going off a few paces, started a furious low-toned argument in Turki: he emphasized his words by beating his fist in his palm.

I walked over to them: "Perhaps you have other guests . . .?"

The kalantar tugged at his beard again.

"I know your customs," I said. "I come to you as a friend and while I am in your camp, your friends are mine—even if outside they are my enemies."

He seemed relieved, but still a shade doubtful.

"If they will give you the same undertaking as I, there will be no trouble. I give you my word."

I held out my hand and he took it. He led the way back towards the encampment.

As we walked I said, quietly, to Bezard in English: "Have you spoken of our story yet?"

"No, sahib, my cousin was too difficult and I did not think it would help us."

"Do not speak of it to anyone until I give the word." I hesitated, for I was not sure if the cousin understood English.

"Does the kalantar speak my tongue?"

"No, sahib. I have seen three men," he went on.

The kalantar looked curiously at us while we spoke, but said nothing. At the entrance to the camp, I unslung my rifle and took out my pistol. Then I held them out towards him. He shook his head.

"Your word is enough, Major." Then he turned before us to the door of the golden tent.

I was placed in a tent near the kalantar's own sleeping-quarters; though small, it was very comfortable. The low side walls had earth piled against the outside, which kept the place warm and free from draughts. The north side was left open, as was custom, to give light and air.

A lovely faded carpet from Tabriz covered the floor, while gay tribal rugs hung down from the tent walls. The furniture consisted of two stools, an earthenware bowl, a pitcher of water, and a rush screen that could divide the space into two. With my bed and saddle-bags, I soon made myself quite at home; Bezard went the other side of the screen to sleep at the door.

When I had washed and changed into my uniform tunic, the kalantar appeared.

"I have spoken to—my other guests; they have agreed. I would like you to meet them."

The kalantar led me to the ceremonial tent; three men, who had been sitting on cushions on the floor, rose as we entered; The Skull was not among them. There was a pause while we looked at each other. The kalantar stood in the background, vaguely waving his hands—not quite sure how this matter would turn out. Two were about my age. One was fair and the other dark. The

third was a tall, fine-looking man, thin and spare, with steel in his piercing glance, and a blade-like precision of movement as he strode across to speak to the kalantar. As I waited for introductions to begin, the first two became a blur in the background. I knew that this was the one that counted. His look, the way he spoke to the kalantar, most of all the coiled-spring tension of his stride made me think of a bright well-tempered blade. From that moment I thought of him—called him—" The Sword." Where The Skull might be was guess-work; perhaps he was hiding at this moment somewhere in the camp. But here was a worthy partner—and a very important Friend of Iran. There was something in his expression that I seemed to recognize, although I could swear he was a total stranger to me.

At length I broke the silence and addressed myself to him, speaking in Persian.

" Major Conway, British Army," I said.

The Sword gave a stiff bow and answered in the same language. " As we can claim no such status while we are here, I hope that you will forgive any discourtesy in lack of names as I introduce my friends." He waved a hand towards the others, who bowed in unison.

" And in deference to our host," I said, " I suggest we only speak in his tongue while we are his guests."

He nodded. " Agreed—and to avoid unpleasant topics, let us assume that the world does not exist outside this valley."

He smiled and held out his cigarette-case; as I took one, I noticed it was one of our own cigarettes—and I could not help wondering where it had come from.

" Tell me," he said, as he struck a match, " did you have a good journey here? "

We both kept to our bargain, and soon I was enjoying myself. All the more so as I could see that they were restive and ill at ease. The kalantar, relieved that he had not got a minor war on his hands, treated both sides impartially, and went out of his way to entertain us. There were feasts, songs, dancing, and hunting. Mounted on thoroughbred Arab horses, with the kalantar and his retainers, falcon on wrist, we ranged the wide valleys, looking for herds of gazelle.

The feasts were splendid. Taken into the big goatskin tent, we sat around on the floor; only the eldest and the nearest to the kalantar took part, waited on by the younger men; no woman appeared. We ate from great steaming silver platters of roast ibex, mouflon, kid, or gazelle, piled high on rice and vegetables. One of these, I remembered long after, is a kind of wild thistle that, boiled, loses its prickles and tastes just like asparagus.

With unknown eyes on me, I took great care to remember to take the correct number of cups of sweet black coffee; to pick up food and eat it only with my right hand; to give the belch of satisfaction at the right moment. It was a strain, and I really had to take a grip on myself for the worst time of all.

Sitting at the kalantar's right hand, in the place of honour, I had to accept the first morsel from him. It was always the chief delicacy—one of the eyes. I shall never forget that brown hand, holding between finger and thumb something that looked like a congealed bull's-eye, coming towards me, ready to push it in my mouth. The only thing to do was to swallow it whole . . .

Life passed peacefully enough. But there was no doubt that they were worried; they were waiting for something. If they were waiting for the arrival of The Skull, then I would just sit it out.

All this time, Bezard was for ever enlarging on any prowess that I might have in the smallest degree. He had spoken of judo, and one evening I was persuaded to give a demonstration and take on some of the tribesmen. I let them come at me one at a time, how they liked, and gained prestige by putting some twenty on their backs in under fifteen minutes. The kalantar was intrigued by this sport, and he asked me to give the young men some instruction. This was arranged for the following morning, but something happened later that night to upset the even tenor of our existence.

It started in a small way. We were all sitting round in the great tent after the evening meal. Bezard Ali, who was in the crowd, to draw attention to himself and trying, doubtless, to do me a bit more good at the same time, began to tell the incident of the pig and how I had saved his life.

To return the compliment, I told them of how he had protected me from the mob outside the mosque in Yezd. Bezard, now thoroughly excited, jumped up, and pulling out his Luger, showed them exactly how he had held the crowd at bay.

The Sword, who had been sitting there, laughing and encouraging him with the rest, saw the gun. He went very still and his face seemed to freeze. When the tale was finished, he said to Bezard: "May I look at that gun of yours?"

He turned it over slowly and passed it back without a word.

A little later, he said something quietly to his companions; the three rose, and making their excuses to the kalantar, left the tent.

The old tension had returned. Then the kalantar, uneasy too, suggested a game of Ahs, a card game like poker, full of bluff. While waiting for the deal, I asked Bezard for the weapon, and looked at it closely. It was just an ordinary Luger, the butt worn, and on it scratched faintly the initial " S."

The game started, and I had just laid down a lovely hand—two shahs, two warriors, and a dancing girl; my arm was stretched out to take in the pile of money that lay in the centre of the rug, when the hangings at the door were pushed aside and The Skull stalked into the tent.

He looked deadly tired, the breeches and shirt that he wore stained with mud and hard travel; but his hand was on his holster and I was cross-legged on the floor with Bezard's Luger lying on the carpet well out of reach.

I could not have believed it would take so long to regain one's feet from that position; if the kalantar had not been so quick, I would

have had it. But two words ripped out in Turki, the crowd closed in, and a second later The Skull's gun thudded on the carpet beside Bezard's Luger.

Now I was standing only three feet from him; he was so tall that I had to look right up.

He ignored the kalantar. " So," he said, staring down at me, " Conway the acrobat. I understand that you are playing a game here with my colleagues. One, I know, regrets his promise now." He jerked his head to where The Sword was standing, stiff and white-faced, behind him. The Skull looked down at the carpet. " I have just told how you came by that gun," he said.

If inspiration comes but once, I think that I was granted my full share at that moment. Reaching forward, for the second time in a month, I smacked a face.

A sort of whistling sigh ran round the tent. The Skull stood quite still, four red finger-marks burning on a dead white cheek. With a quick prayer that Bezard would not fail me, I did the bravest, perhaps also the most foolish thing of my life. I turned my attention from those sunken eyes that were blazing murder, and faced towards the kalantar.

" This is the man," I said loudly, in Persian, " this is the man who has stolen my wife."

The kalantar had his hand on his knife. " Your wife? " he said, " I do not understand."

" Let Bezard, your cousin, tell you—he will speak the truth."

" Please God," I thought, " let him lie and let him do it well."

Bezard stepped forward; there was a strange far-away look in his eyes. When he spoke, his voice was quite steady and calm.

" My Major had a wife," he said, " a lovely girl with hair like burning coals.

" While we were fighting," Bezard went on, " this—" he just looked—" this stole her away. When he had finished with her, she was sold to a merchant in the Gulf: where she is now, we do not know. I did not speak of it before as it was not my trouble —not till now, my cousin, because of your hospitality. I have spoken the truth."

It sounded ludicrous, but it worked; from around the tent, above the excited muttering, came a low growl of voices and one or two shouts; the tribe were on my side.

The kalantar turned to The Skull: " What say you to this? " His tone was not friendly.

The Skull was slowly rubbing his cheek; he did not answer the kalantar. " What is the meaning of this play-acting? " he asked me.

" An opportunity to settle two accounts; mine and Manassian's."

He looked down at his finger-nails and then back to the kalantar. " It is all lies," he said.

Bezard's voice came, quiet, without a tremor. " As your cousin, on my honour as a tribesman, I swear it," he said.

The kalantar seemed to dismiss the whole problem; now his gaze turned to me

"What would you wish, my friend?" It was the first time he had called me that.

"A chance to settle this before all here, tomorrow. A rifle each and ten rounds, chosen by you; a thousand paces apart in the narrow valley beyond the yilak, at noon: a coin tossed for advantage of sun, wind, and slope; and only to move forwards against each other."

There was a roar of applause at this; here was something the direct descendants of Ghengis Khan could understand. The kalantar said: "It is right and fair."

The Skull looked across at me again.

"I hear you are a first-class shot?" This was in English.

"Yes, first-class."

"Then I do not propose to commit suicide."

With a stiff bow to the kalantar, he turned on his heel and left the tent. I made my excuses soon after. A crowd had surrounded me as soon as The Skull had gone, offering advice as to local conditions and arguing among themselves as to the best points from which to watch the contest. In one corner, they even started betting; I was gratified to hear that at least I started favourite, at about six to four.

I went over to where the kalantar was sitting with some of the elders. "I think I shall go to my tent," I said.

"A long sleep would be a wise thing; I shall come over with you."

As we walked across the encampment, the fires were twinkling in the dark still night and the sharp, pungent smell of burning camel-dung drifted all around us. Bezard was by my side, and behind us followed two dark shapes, keeping a steady distance. The kalantar saw me turn my head to look at them.

"They will be outside your tent tonight and be with you everywhere till tomorrow. I have done the same for the others; it is just in case of any misunderstanding."

"I am sorry about this matter," I said, "for it is abuse of your kindness."

"No, it had to be; but I am worried lest there be trouble with your army should anything—unfortunate—happen."

"I have thought of that. If you will wait a moment in my tent, I shall write a paper. If it is necessary, Bezard Ali will take it to the right man in our army. There will be no trouble then."

At the tent, I tore a leaf from my notebook and wrote a formal letter to Sandy. I was sure that he would read between the lines and stop any reprisals against the tribe.

The kalantar thanked me gravely and left; doubtless he was hurrying back to the great tent to put some of his own money on. I rolled up in my blankets and lay smoking a last cigarette. A dim oil lamp was burning on the other side of the screen and I could hear Bezard's movements as he made ready for bed; outside, once or twice, the chink of a boot against a stone showed that the guard was on patrol.

I was calm and confident. There was nothing brave in my feelings; if this contest did take place, I had the advantage of skill, age, build, and, I thought too, physical fitness. But, I was even more sure that it would never happen. I did not doubt The Skull's courage, but I had put him in an impossible spot. Conway, a cog in the British machine, was expendable, but the mainspring of the Friends of Iran was not.

I drifted into an easy sleep, and it seemed a moment later when a hand, pressing hard behind my ear, woke me quietly and instantly. The kalantar's bearded face was close to mine; he was kneeling beside me and in one hand held the oil lamp. He said quietly, without preliminary, " The long one has saddled his animals and is preparing to leave. The guard have detained him and warned me. What do you wish? "

I looked at my watch; it was half past three.

" Let him go," I said. " I do not care to stalk that kind of game."

" No." His voice had gone very grim. " As well as a liar, he is a coward."

Then he looked at me straight and for a long time.

" I think you know a great deal of matters on which we have not spoken; I was promised gold as a token of good faith in a certain thing, and it has not come. Now it is expected that I should fight beside wife-stealers, and cowards who run away in the night."

There was a pause; then he gripped my shoulder.

" The surnay will not sound in this kalantar till the move to the kishlak in the autumn."

After he had gone, I called softly through the rush screen.

" Are you awake, Bezard? "

" Yes, sahib."

" You heard? "

" All, and it is good." A faint note of annoyance crept into his voice. " There is one thing that I am sorry for."

" What on earth are you talking about? "

I heard him turn over.

" Oh," he said sleepily, " in the story, your wife should not have gone to a merchant in the Gulf, it is too far away. She should have been sold to a brothel in Isfahan; it would have sounded much better."

In the morning I decided that the sooner we were back in Teheran, the better. I told Bezard to pack and went to the big tent to warn the kalantar of our intention.

" I am sorry," he said, " but I think you are wise. I have told those three that they are no longer welcome. When are you leaving? "

" After noon; after the time of my appointment."

He smiled. " He will not come back, my friend."

" No, but I must be here just the same."

" Come to the great tent at noon, then; we shall wait and then I shall say good-bye to you."

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On my way back, the escort still behind me, we had to pass quite near the group by the door, and at my approach, The Sword left them and walked stiffly towards me. The escort unslung their rifles, and we stopped to let him come on. He stood very close.

"I had to speak to you—that gun—can I have it? You see, it belonged to my son."

I could now see why his face had puzzled me when we had first met. "I'm sorry," I said; and I really meant it.

"Can I have it?" he asked. "And his other personal things?"

"The gun, certainly; I shall send it over to your tent. The others have gone to Teheran and the decision cannot be mine. But I shall do my best. If it is possible, how will you collect them?"

"You are kind. Leave them poste restante at the Teheran Central Post Office, addressed to Abu Bekr, and the package will be collected. I can trust, of course, that the collector will not be followed?"

"Of course."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I warn you that I will repay. I'm going to get you for this." A new note crept into his voice: "I consider myself released from my promise in three days' time—so then, watch out." He turned on his heel and walked back to the tent.

With great difficulty, only after a promise of a better one, did I manage to extract the Luger from Bezard and send it over.

At five minutes to noon, Bezard and I walked over to the great tent. There was a crowd waiting and I talked there with the kalantar and elders till the single crack of a rifle announced the sun at its zenith. A sort of ripple ran through the waiting crowd, but in the wide shimmering space before us there was no sign of The Skull. We waited a full five minutes and then the kalantar turned to where six of his men, armed and mounted, sat waiting with two spare horses.

"You will travel fast and safe with them until you are out of my territory—just in case someone should be waiting for you to come alone."

Then he beckoned, and a young man came forward, carrying a lovely tribal rug. The kalantar laid it across my arms.

"Come back, and do not forget us. This is for you; each time you see it, remember our saying—'Where my carpet is, there is my home.'"

I had taken his hand when we all heard it; faint but clear, and far, far above us, came the booming notes of the surnay. My eyes travelled up to where, perched on a crag, the player was sending his music out to the next valley. Only it was not music, but a sort of two-toned Morse code.

An awful thought crossed my mind; but the kalantar smiled.

"He is telling my neighbour what has happened here and what I have decided to do. Somehow, I do not think that any of the tribe will be marching on the road."

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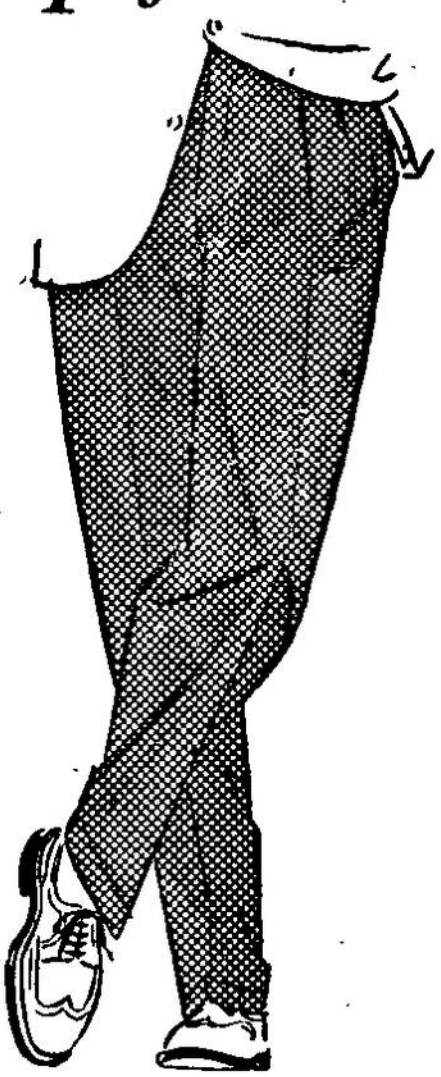

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Everything was just the same when I got back to report to my Colonel at Room 43 at G.H.Q., Teheran. Perhaps there were small differences, but all of them were nice ones.

As I walked into that outer office, Tania jumped to her feet, while Sergeant Holman stopped the everlasting exploration of his molars to rummage tactfully through a pile of files. She caught my hand as I passed. "Bill, I'm so glad," she said quickly; then I was through the inner door, back in Sandy's big room.

He was showing the strain; he seemed more gaunt, more jerky than ever. He heard my long story through to the end without interruption; but while I was telling it, he must have changed his position from standing, to walking, or sitting, at least twenty times. The pipe had got to the state of never being quite out or lit; his fingers were stained blacker than ever.

When I had finished, he said: "You have done well, Bill—more than well."

"If it hadn't been for Bezard Ali playing up at the right moment, I shouldn't have done at all—I think I should have been nicely done in myself."

"Yes," he said. "I should like to see him officially, to thank him. We must do something more about that."

With an embarrassed clearing of his throat, he slid a letter across his desk towards me. "You had better have that back now," he said.

It was odd, looking at my own writing of the one word "Tania" on the envelope. I stuffed it in my pocket without a word.

Sandy was examining his nails. "I reckon you have four days' leave left; by an extraordinary coincidence Tania has applied for some for the same period. I have taken the liberty of booking you two single rooms at the Shemiran Hotel. As time, at the moment, is yours, not mine, you had both better b—— off quick and enjoy yourselves."

Had there been an accent on the word "single?" I could not be sure. I turned at the door.

"Have you made anything of the fragments I sent you?"

He shook his head. "Nothing, and I've bought enough of your bloody *gaz* to stock a sweet-shop."

"Chinamen?" I said hopefully.

A shadow crossed his face.

"Not yet, Bill, some time soon, I hope."

We loved it at the Shemiran. It had been one of Shah Reza's palaces, and when he had been deposed, it had been given back to the people, and turned into a hotel. In its luxury, its lovely setting on the slope of the foot-hills, we passed our short time together in eating, drinking, swimming in the pool, or lazing in the lovely gardens.

These last were formal, well kept, western; but they could not touch the Bagh-i-Aram. I tried to describe that to Tania, but the right words just would not come. She put her hand in mine. "One day, Bill, you must take me there."

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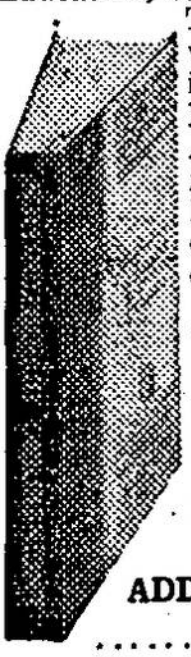

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" One day I shall," I said.

I was trying hard to get right to the root of my own feelings. So much of me wanted to go right on with this—through to its only conclusion. The other half hung back, afraid; the half that was glad that I had got my letter back unread, and had been embarrassed, almost ashamed, by the things I had said in it.

Tania—she was happy, gay, but under it all was the natural sadness of her race and the shadow of her own personal experience. I did not know till then that she had never seen or heard a word of her family since 1939. Parents, brother, and sister had vanished into the great unknown; for all she knew, they might well be dead. Always tender, at times possessive, I had the feeling that she was trying hard to keep me at arm's length.

It was only at the end of that last day in Teheran that I had a chance to find out the way she did feel.

It was the first day after my leave and I had reported to the office; Sandy was reading some papers when I came in and did not look up or speak for some moments. When he did, his voice was very subdued.

" I'm sorry, Bill, but this is not going to be a very pleasant morning for either of us. I've got to take you up before the General. I'm afraid you have got a rocket coming."

" What on earth for? "

" Going into tribal territory against orders."

" But—"

" I think you had better save all that for the old man." He looked at his watch. " Well, let's get it over. You had better look the soldier and take a cane with you."

We walked down the unending corridors of G.H.Q. in complete silence. I was raging; to have gone through all I had and then be caught and spitted by some footling general order, probably sandwiched between " Persian anthem—respect for," and " Feet, care of, Bilharzia areas." I wished I had broken orders again and kept a copy of the cipher that Sandy had sent me.

The one thing that cheered my progress was Sandy, for it was the first time I had seen him wearing a cap. It was a floppy affair, with a peak that jutted out level with the tip of his beaky nose; if it had been dyed blue, he would have looked just like a Teheran taxi-driver.

We made the progress from antechamber to antechamber; at the last there was no further advance save through the General's solid oak door.

Sandy whispered to a P.A., who knocked and went in; then Sandy followed him. There was a pause; I sat on a table swinging my legs—I didn't care, I'd bloody soon show the lot. Then the door opened and Sandy reappeared, looking very military. " Major Conway," he barked.

" Well, here we go," I thought. I slipped from the table; cane in right hand, swinging. Then left, right, left, right, through the door and up to the big desk. Cane up under left arm, right hand

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down; then last, right hand up in salute. One-two-three-down; I chucked up a beauty.

" Good morning, sir," I said.

He was sitting there, the long lanky figure we all knew so well—the efficient commander and generous host; now straight in his chair, cap on, he looked very severe.

" What does this all mean, Conway? " he asked.

There was a dull thud and a click from behind me as Sandy shut the big door; then the General seemed to uncoil and relax.

" Pull up chairs, you two, and sit down," he said in a completely different voice.

I just looked at him with my mouth open; then Sandy came forward and said: " I haven't told him anything yet, sir; I thought if I did he would overact. As it is, we have had the perfect picture of outraged virtue spread all over the place on the way here."

The General laughed. " I'm sorry, Conway, we both owe you an apology, but there has been a lot of leakage of information from this Headquarters and we are using you to try and help pin it. On top of that, we want an excuse to have you back on the plains for a bit—we think that Teheran is a little unhealthy for you at the moment; you have made yourself rather unpopular in certain quarters."

He paused for a moment.

" I have heard of the great work you have done, and I am very, very conscious of it. But, to help what may happen, it is necessary to discredit you, officially, for the time being. Do you mind that? "

" Not if you don't really think it, and it will help, sir," I said.

He pulled a buff form towards him.

" You were in tribal territory on the twenty-eighth of June? "

" Yes, sir."

" Contrary to General Order 1149 of 1943 and written instruction sent to you by Colonel Mackenzie? "

" Yes, sir."

" Will you accept my award and forgo your right to apply for a court martial? "

" Yes, sir."

He looked at Sandy. " That should cover it, I think." Then he wrote on the form with a flourish. " Severe reprimand," he said, almost apologetically, " but I don't know how long it will take to get it scrubbed off your record of service."

Sandy stood up. " I think we have been here long enough, sir." Then: " May I tell him? "

The General drummed his fingers on the desk. " Yes. But for God's sake, make him understand what is involved."

He got up and held out his hand to me. " Good luck, Conway; we'll have you back just as soon as it is expedient."

Before he opened the door, Sandy said: " For God's sake, Bill, try to look as if you really had had a severe rep—take that stupid grin off your face."

I marched out, trying my best to play the part of someone who had just escaped from the next most serious thing to a court martial. Back in the office, the staff were dismissed and the tap act started, so that the rush of water would prevent any possibility of eavesdropping.

Sandy stopped to relight his pipe and then, between puffs of smoke, he quoted: " *Three tents in Cairo; two fly on; Elias is a Chinaman.* Top Secret, Bill, and for once it means all of that," he added.

" All right," I said impatiently, " go on."

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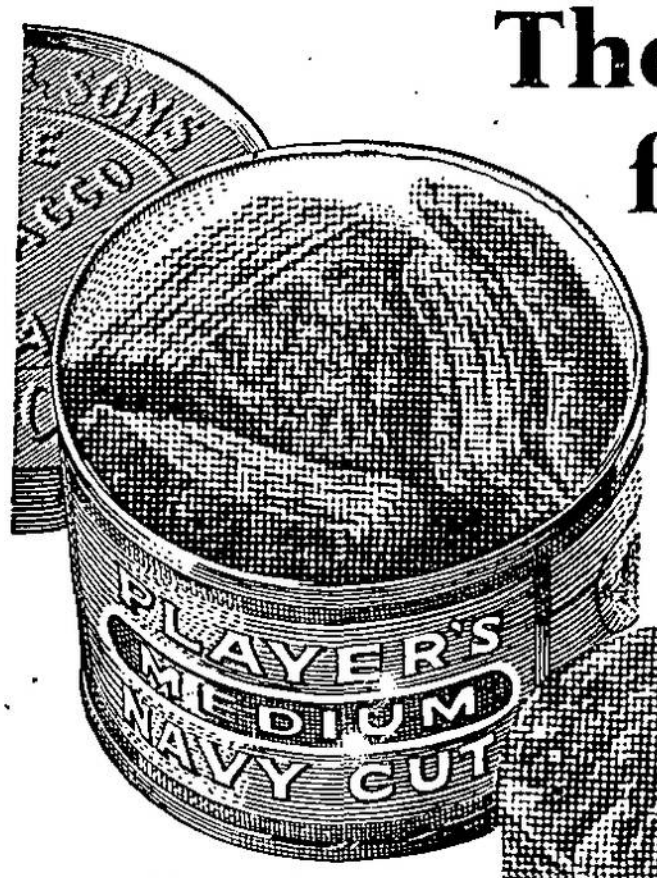

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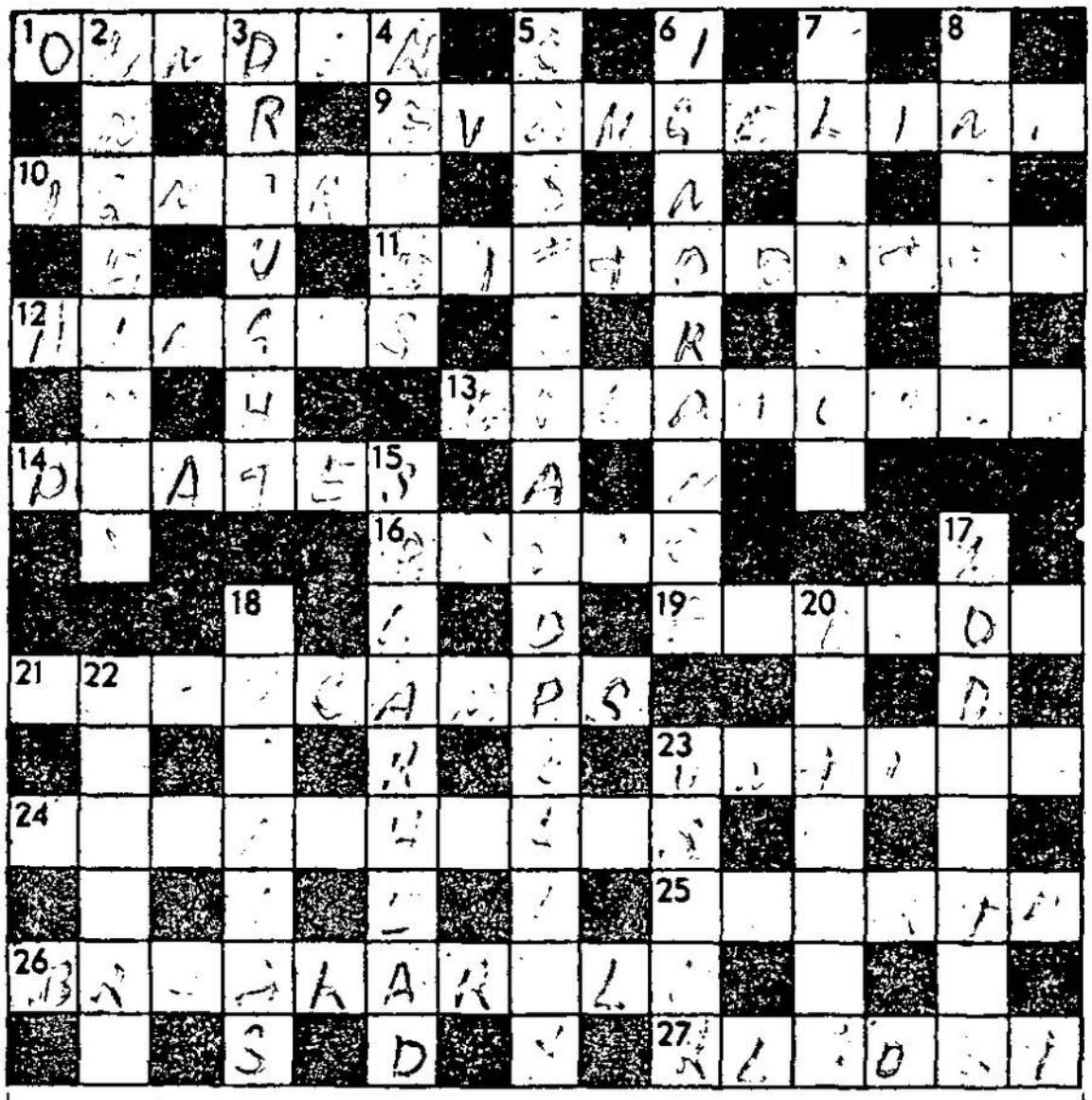

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CLUES

Across

1 Some songs carry this load (6).

9 She went a long way with Longfellow (10).

10 A backward U.S. soldier on a famous sea-mark? Take no notice! (6).

11 Same again, please, twice (5, 5).

12 Turning-points of a door (6).

13 A beastly way to behave (9).

14 Alice's jurors wrote on them (6).

16 The woodland god is in charge, with a frightening result (5).

19 "For Lycidas your — is not dead" (Milton) (6).

21 Low-down military establishments? (4, 5).

23 United? A slight change makes it quite the reverse (6).

24 They form the scene of marital carry-overs (10).

25 Associated by Reade with the cloister (6).

26 If you do this at school, punishment can still be measured out to you (5, 1, 4).

27 Repartee in the laboratory (6).

Down

2 Awkward, though there's profit in it (8).

3 The little medico should—what? Pray for rain, perhaps (7).

4 Eden's disturbance creates necessities (5).

5 Heavenly twins (6, 3, 6).

6 They don't know (9).

7 None of your lip, else I'll knock you into shape! (7).

8 Begins tilting, so the middle may infuse (6).

15 Harpoon the most senior master to get the vanguard (9).

17 It sounds as though the heavenly body had an earthly nationality (4, 4).

18 Seal up the "gen" on the West African coast (7).

20 About a pamphlet—won't you withdraw it? (7).

22 Stick to it here after the Christian era (6).

23 The court functionary suggests the fall of a famous literary house (5).

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